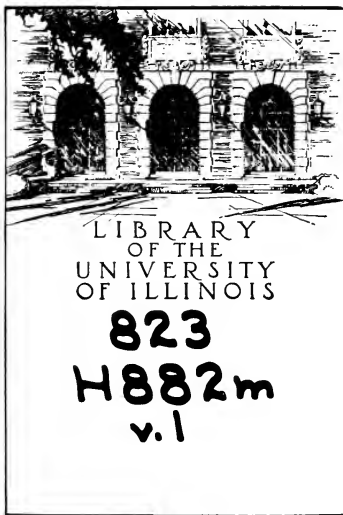




17th Year





MY LADY COQUETTE.

A NOVEL.

BY

“ R I T A,”

AUTHOR OF “VIVIENNE,” “LIKE DIAN’S KISS,”

“COUNTESS DAPHNE,” ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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TO

Henry Irving, Esq.,

WHOSE MARVELLOUS IMPERSONATION OF

MATTHIAS

IN

"THE BELLS"

SUGGESTED THE LEADING IDEA IN THE STORY,

THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED

BY

THE AUTHOR.

LONDON, *March* 1881.



MY LADY COQUETTE.



CHAPTER I.

BRIGHTLY gleams the morning sunshine, this fourteenth of February, 186—, on the latticed casements and the quaint old gables of Mervyn Court. It peers through the dry framework of creepers and rose-bushes, it gives the dingy ivy a new and brighter sheen, and finally pours in a warm triumphant flood over the face and figure of a girl standing in the shabby breakfast-room, with flushed cheeks and angry eyes gazing at a mass of lace and flower-

wreathed paper which she holds in her hand—a valentine!

It has come by the morning post, in company with various other envelopes and boxes, all bearing missives from admirers and friends of her own. But, of all the many, this one only has a special attraction for her; to it alone does she give the thoughts of her wilful capricious little heart, the look of those lovely gleaming long-lashed eyes, that have, even in the short space of seventeen summers, done so much damage to mankind, youthful and mature.

She is very lovely this girl. From the warm rich gold of her hair to the tiny arched feet which her dress just allows to be seen, she is faultless—faultless in form and figure and colouring, with a face wonderfully winning in its changes of expression, in its mobile, passionate, wilful beauty that never seems quite the same, but varies with her varying moods, as the sea takes its colours from the changing sky.

It is a face too fair to escape notice, wherever it may be, a face like that of which the poet sung—

“Thine eyes are stars of morning,
Thy lips are crimson flowers.”

But now the eyes, deep, dark, and purple, like the heart of a violet, are positively flashing with wrathful indignation, and the sweet red lips are expressing all the disdain and contempt that silent lips can.

The object of all this anger and indignation is seemingly the lace-edged paper on which are penned the following lines :—

“I do confess thou’rt young and fair,
And I might have been brought to love thee,
Had I not found the slightest pray’r
That breath could frame had pow’r to move thee.
But I can let thee now alone,
As worthy to be loved by none.

I do confess thou’rt sweet, but find
Thee such an unthrift of thy sweets,
Thy favours are but like the wind
That kisseth everything it meets.”

“Who could have sent it?” she says, as

she throws the luckless valentine furiously down. "What impudence! Oh, if *ever* I find out!"

The speech is cut short by a noise and bustle in the hall, followed immediately by the appearance of two other girls and a tall boy of that delightful hobbledehoy age which is so trying to sisters and other feminine members of a household.

"Holloa! Why, here's Yolande making free with all our valentines!" shouts the youth. "Enid, Vi, look out, or you won't have a chance of seeing any!"

"Don't be so absurd, Arthur!" says his sister, sharply. "I never touch anything that's not my own. In that respect I differ strongly from you."

"But are there any for us, Yolande?" the other girls cry eagerly, as they press close to their beautiful elder sister and peer over her shoulder at the scattered Cupid-offerings which lie on the breakfast-table.

"They are by your own plates," she answers

impatiently, as she puts the paper she has been reading into its outer cover and then tries to slip it surreptitiously into her pocket.

This manœuvre is speedily discovered by Arthur, who in true brotherly fashion proceeds to draw the attention of the others to it.

“What’s in that one you’re hiding—a secret?” he asks quickly. “Why can’t you let us see it as well as these?”

“Because I don’t choose,” answers his sister, with a rising flush on her cheeks and a vain attempt to disguise her wrath at this discovery on his part. “It’s no business of yours what I get!”

“Hoity-toity!” says Arthur, with an aggravating expression of intense amazement. “Girls, what has happened to our fair Yolande? Who has dared to ruffle her sweet serenity, and barbed a Cupid’s missive with a shaft that stings her gentle breast!”

“Arthur, how can you be so ridiculous?” exclaims his sister, half laughing even in her most natural desire to inflict upon the sharp-

eyed youth that condign punishment popularly known as "a box on the ears." "Come, girls, let me see yours," she adds hurriedly, in the vain hope of turning attention from herself.

"No ; don't you do anything of the sort," interposes the incorrigible Arthur. "Make her confess what she's concealing from her affectionate and sympathising relatives first. Confidence deserves confidence, Yo."

"Don't call me that ! You know I hate it !" cries Yolande hastily.

"Ever since—ahem—"

"Will you be quiet, you torment ?"

"Ever since Signor Roderigo Brabante mistook it for a boy's name—eh, sis ?" persists the unabashed youth.

"Oh, Yolande, is not this lovely ? Who can it be from ?" comes now from the clear treble of the twin-sisters, who are poring over their treasures with the delight and excitement of bashful fifteen.

Yolande turns to them relieved, and bends down unnecessarily low in the attempt to

cool the hot cheeks, the sudden flame of colour of which is to be attributed only to some hidden meaning beneath Arthur's joking allusion to Signor Roderigo.

"Very pretty !" she says. "I wonder who sent them ?"

"And I have nothing !" exclaims Arthur ruefully. "Well, considering how I danced with that fat Judith Hargreaves the whole of last evening, and how I devoted myself to her amusement, I must say I did expect a—a something. I am disappointed in that young lady ; I really am."

"Perhaps she heard of your flattering remarks afterwards," suggests Yolande. "You are so indiscreet in your confidences, you know, Arthur."

. "My sweet sister, I stand rebuked. Very likely it has come to her ears that I likened her to a keg of butter, or a sack of flour, or something equally suitable. By Jove ! how I could have stood it I don't know ! The very memory of those waltzes makes my arms ache."

“Better your arms than your heart,” says Yolande softly ; and then, as if fearful of retort, she turns away to the breakfast-table and begins with nervous haste to rattle the teacups and arrange the plates.

“Papa is late,” she says. “Vi, you had better go and tell him breakfast is ready.”

Vi, otherwise Vivien, puts down her valentines reluctantly, and leaves the room to do her sister’s bidding.

Enid and Arthur seat themselves at the table, and with the healthy appetite of youth proceed to attack the pile of bread-and-butter. With well-assumed indifference Yolande sweeps away the heap of missives from her plate, and devotes herself to the task of pouring out coffee.

“I believe somebody has sent Yo a rude valentine,” asserts her brother presently ; he has far too much of the talent of teasing to drop a subject which he has found to be unwelcome. “Come, Yo, confess, there’s a good girl, and then I’ll call him out and have satisfaction, even at the pistol’s mouth.”

“The best satisfaction you could give would be to hold your tongue,” says Yolande sharply.

“It’s a moral as well as a physical impossibility to do that, especially when employing one’s gastronomic organs, as I am at present doing,” answers Arthur, with his mouth full of bread-and-butter.

“I wish you were back at school again!” exclaims his sister sharply. “There has been no such thing as peace or quietness in the house since you came home.”

“So much for sisterly affection!” cries Arthur theatrically. “Leaving gratitude out of the question, this is the return I get for my hours of self-denial, my incessant care for your amusement and entertainment, my—”

“Oh, do be quiet, you tiresome boy!” exclaims Yolande, losing all patience at last. “Thank goodness, here’s papa!”

Looking at her face now as she rises to welcome the white-haired bent old man who enters the room, no one could have helped being struck by its perfection. Such tender-

ness, such welcome, such perfect protecting love, shine in the deep humid eyes that even her lips are hardly more eloquent as she utters her morning greeting.

Her father's glance is equally loving. Very precious indeed to his heart is this lovely first-born, born to him late in life, as all his children were, and then left from very early childhood to his sole care and love. The pretty delicate young wife had gladdened his home but a very few years, when death claimed her for himself, and the three girls and Arthur have been brought up almost entirely at home.

Hence perhaps the perfect confidence, the entire absence of fear and restraint that reigns between them and their father, and gives rise to many taunts and objections on the part of other heads of families in the neighbourhood. The young Mervyns are usually looked upon as spoilt, useless, and self-indulged. The girls — Yolande especially — are pronounced conceited, frivolous, and far too fond

of admiration. Notwithstanding, they are more admired and more popular than any other of the female members of society in Ashbourne ; and Yolande has all the youth of the county at her dainty feet.

Poor Yolande ! With her warm heart, her passionate fancies, her marvellous loveliness, her indulged caprices, it is a wonder she is not even more spoiled than she is. Of control she knows nothing. Her father always allows her to do just as she pleases ; and, as much as lies in his power, ministers to her wants and desires.

They are not very numerous luckily ; for the Mervyns are by no means a wealthy family, and the old court is generally looked upon as dilapidated and shabby in the extreme. Yet many among the *nouveaux riches*, the wealthy proprietors of new-bought estates and lordly mansions abounding in Ashbourne, would have gladly sacrificed their pretentious abodes for the antique grandeur and nobility of Mervyn Court. Yolande loves it dearly.

Every ivy-crowned gable, every quaint old lattice, every nook of the old shadowy hall, the carved oak staircase, the great dreary drawing-rooms, so seldom used now, the picture-gallery, with its host of dead and gone Mervyns, are precious and beautiful exceedingly in her eyes. They have histories of their own that have charmed her childish fancy and coloured her gay bright youth. They have fostered in her some pardonable pride in and love for those bygone ancestors who had been noble and true and "faithful unto death" to those they served and those they loved. They have told her of brave deeds, of sacrifices rendered, of chivalrous actions, of tender thoughts, of grave duties; and, despite the lightheartedness and coquetry and superficial brilliance of her character, there lies beneath it a true and steadfast nobility, fostered by such associations, and built upon such records as these.

The breakfast goes on cheerfully now, none of the young Mervyns being at all afflicted

with bashfulness in the presence of their respected progenitor, but employing their tongues as freely before him as they are accustomed to do when by themselves.

“Father,” remarks Arthur presently, “you will be losing some of your lambs if you don’t look out. Are you aware how many suitors are at hand already? Look there!”

Mr Mervyn glances amusedly at the pile of valentines on the side table, and then looks at Yolande.

“All yours, my dear?” he asks.

“Oh, no! Some are Enid’s and Vi’s,” answers Yolande hurriedly. “Stupid things! I wonder how people can trouble to send such rubbish!”

“It occurs to my memory that not so very long ago Miss Mervyn took a considerable interest in those same stupid things,” remarks Arthur. “I have a distinct remembrance of her waylaying the postman on St Valentine’s morn with a zeal that was highly creditable. By Jove, how girls do change! Only two or

three years ago you were up to anything, Yolande, and could climb a tree and play a game at cricket almost as well as if you were a boy, and now—”

Arthur's face is expressive of such intense disgust that Yolande goes off into a peal of delicious silvery laughter.

“Why don't you finish?” she asks, when her mirth has a little subsided.

“Well, now,” continues her brother indignantly, “you think only of long tails to your gowns and all the young fools you can catch and bring philandering about you. What they see in you I'm sure I don't know. You were rather a jolly girl once; but that was ages ago, before your head was turned with spooning and valentines.”

“I had valentines even in those ages ago,” remarks Yolande.

“Yes; and even then you always had three to our one,” chimes in Enid.

“Oh, but two were always from Lance and Dick; and they don't count;” interrupts Vi.

“Well, whatever fellows can see in girls to waste their money on them in valentines beats my comprehension!” says Arthur energetically. “I never should do it.”

“Wait a while, my boy, and you’ll tell a different story,” his father puts in. “At your age boys have a strong antagonism towards the opposite sex—probably because a few years later they are bound to pay for that indifference whether they will or no.”

“I’m sure I never shall,” asserts Arthur vehemently. “When one has horses and guns and lots of fun, and can see life and travel about the world, what’s the use of tying yourself to a woman’s apron-strings? Such bosh!”

“Don’t talk of what you know nothing about, Arty,” says Vi, with dignity.

“You go and learn grammar and mind your own business!” retorts her brother. “Hang it all, I’m not going to be lectured by a parcel of girls! Father, I must go to school again. I’m sick of idleness.”

“What a laudable resolve!” says Yolande. “It is rather a pity that constant reiteration has made it sound somewhat stale in our ears. If your actions were only equal to your intentions, Arty!”

“So they are, only— Well, you see, there’s always something turning up, and it seems a pity to go away just then.”

“I think the rabbits are all shot now,” remarks Mr Mervyn; “and the broken arm is mended—eh, Arthur?”

“Oh, yes,” says the boy shamefacedly, “that’s all right! But, you see, governor, I had to look after the fences, and I wanted to see the tennis-courts made; and—”

“Don’t trouble your brain for any more excuses, my dear boy,” says Yolande placidly. “We all know how far your intentions go, and where they fall short.”

“In that respect we are alike,” returns Arthur, with a grin. “You also have been known to have good intentions, Miss Flirt; and— Why, positively you are blushing! Was

the arrow drawn at a venture so well shot that it hit the mark?"

"You and Yolande are always nagging at each other," remarks quiet Enid. "I don't think it's good taste to introduce your disputes in the family circle so constantly."

"Oh, of course you girls all stick up for one another!" says Arthur, rising and pushing back his chair. "Well, I'll relieve you of my presence. Go to your gowns and frills and fal-als. You little know what you lose by such nonsense. Thank Heaven, I'm not a girl! Bye, bye, Yo. Take care of that secret *billet-doux* in your pocket." And with this parting shaft he leaves the room.

"Yolande," says her father presently, "you won't forget that the Hargreaves dine here to-night, and Mr and Mrs Adair and their friends also?"

"No, I won't forget," answers the girl, stooping low over her cup in order to hide the soft rose-pink of her cheek and brow.

"And, my dear, please impress upon the

cook to be more careful with the soup. It was quite spoilt on the last occasion."

"Very well, papa."

"Are Enid and I to come to dinner?" asks Vivien.

"Yes, if Yolande thinks there will be room."

"Oh, yes, plenty!" says Yolande, still painfully conscious of hot cheeks and uneven pulse.

"Have you finished, girls?"

"Yes!" cry the twins simultaneously.

And then they rise in their turn, and, collecting their valentines, retire from the room with their arms clasped around each other's waist, their normal way of moving about.

Yolande rings the bell for the removal of the breakfast equipage, and then, with a kiss to her father and a remark that his morning paper is cut and ready for his perusal, opens the window and steps out upon the smooth green lawn.





CHAPTER II.

IT is a mild sweet morning, this fourteenth of February, a morning that brings visions of coming spring in its bright glints of sunshine, its soft cool winds, its intense blue sky, its tints of violets from the hedgerows. But Yolande wanders over the lawn and on to the quaint old garden paths, taking but languid interest in all the beauty around her.

At other times the changing shadows, the fragrant air, the breath of the spring-time on her cheek, the dazzling green of the new-grown grass as the sun-rays fall over it in warm and loving radiance would have touched the poetic faculty within her heart, and stirred her to that sympathy with all things bright

and beautiful in nature which was usual to her. But now her mind is troubled ; a vague unrest had stolen away the peaceful calm so long her own ; and all the more, in that such a feeling is inexplicable and strange, she rebels at its pain and marvels at its pertinacity in recurring.

“ If I only knew,” she says impatiently, as she gazes with perfect unconsciousness up at the great wide boughs of a spreading yew-tree, “ oh, how I would pay him out ! ”

“ In what botanical researches are you now employed ? ” suddenly demands a voice behind her.

She starts and turns round angrily.

“ Arthur, you plague, why don't you find something to do ? You are getting quite unbearable about the house ! ”

“ The house is as much mine as yours, Miss Yolande,” he retorts. “ What were you looking at—birds' nests ? I'll just give you a specimen of your appearance.” And he strikes an attitude, the exaggerated absurdity

of which makes Yolande laugh despite her annoyance.

Then, unable to stand his teasing any longer, she hastens away to the house and proceeds to interview the cook and give the necessary instructions for the evening, not forgetting that caution as to the soup which her father had suggested.

Yolande has no great talent for housekeeping. It seems but the other day that she was running wild with Arthur, bird-nesting, cricketing, fishing, doing all such things as seemed good to her vagrant fancy, and enjoying life fully and utterly as any young unfettered creature can. But now things are changed. A governess has been introduced to teach the young lady various arts and accomplishments, and, in company with Enid and Vi, she has to read, study, and practise for three or four hours daily. This same directress has also insisted that Yolande shall be instructed in the management of household affairs, as befits the eldest daughter of the

family ; and, rebel as she may, at certain times and seasons she has to give in to Miss Skipton's decrees, and under her guidance and direction interview cook and housekeeper.

In these employments the morning hours speed away rapidly, and Yolande has no leisure to re-peruse the missive in her pocket, though its touch and the consciousness of its proximity can flush her cheek and light her eyes with remembered wrath. At intervals her thoughts also seem wandering, for, when cook suggests various side-dishes for the dinner, she listens absently, and once murmurs, "Tomato sauce—oh, yes—and valentines!"

"My dear Miss Mervyn!" says the governess, shocked and amazed.

Yolande starts, colours, and then, with a vigorous effort, returns to the subject in question, and manages without further mistakes to settle the debate. She gives a sigh of intense relief as she re-enters the schoolroom.

"Oh, dear, why must people eat?" she exclaims wearily.

Miss Skipton, delighted at the opportunity afforded for a display of learning, hereupon launches forth into so many reasons, excellent and needful, moral and argumentative, for the necessity of human nature making use of those gastronomic organs wherewith it is supplied that poor Yolande is nearly driven to distraction. She knows Miss Skipton's proclivities only too well, and generally employs her time in dodging warily around any subject likely to produce such an array of logic as that learned lady possesses. In this instance however she has failed lamentably, and submits with a very ill grace to the deluge that follows.

In the schoolroom Vi and Enid are seated, with books and papers before them, and a look of such sweet placid innocence and unconsciousness upon their faces as leads Yolande to wonder what mischief they have just been practising.

She is very *distract* this morning. Her thoughts go wandering off from French his-

tory to various other incongruous subjects that certainly have nothing to do with the life of Bonaparte or the Court of Charles le Douze. Her eyes are more constantly occupied in gazing at the soft sweep of sky stretching in blue and cloudless beauty over the outer world than in perusing the dry and instructive works lying open before her. Very thankful indeed does she feel when the clock strikes one, and at last they are able to shut up books and do "whatever seemeth good unto them" for the remainder of the day. She hurries off as swiftly as her light feet can bear her to her own pretty dainty room, and heaves a sigh of intense relief as, with locked door, and a sense of perfect security from intrusion, she sets herself to study the unwelcome valentine once more.

"Am I such a flirt?" she thinks, as her soft starlike eyes look up from the hateful words and meet their own lustrous reflection in the opposite mirror. "I know I like

dancing and fun and—well, a little admiration; but surely there's no great harm in that? Oh, I hope *he* did not send it! And yet it must have been *he*! No one else would mind what I did; they are so used to me and my ways. Well, I don't care, and I won't care!"—with a stamp of the little foot. "Who is he that I should mind his opinion? I have seen him only three times, and—"

Here she pauses. A tide of crimson sweeps over her fair low brow, her lovely cheeks. She flings the luckless valentine to the farthest corner of the room.

"I hate him!" she cries, rising and pacing up and down the soft-carpeted floor. "Oh, if only I had not said that! Perhaps he thought it was a hint. A hint! Just as if Lance and Dick and young Tempestown and Jack Fortescue, and—and—heaps of fellows weren't glad enough of the opportunity of sending me valentines! And to think that I wanted one from him! Oh,

how shall I meet him to-night? If I could only look perfectly cool and unconcerned it would be all right; but I am sure the moment he looks at me it will be all over—and—he will know!”

Another abrupt pause. Then she goes slowly over to the corner where the valentine has fluttered and smooths out the crumpled paper, and once more peruses it.

“‘To my Lady Coquette,’” she reads. “Oh, Mr Denzil Charteris, if you mean that, it will go hard with me if I don’t make you rue the day you wrote or said it! No; I won’t throw this away. It shall be kept as a memento of this day and of my vow—the vow I make over this senseless paper that you have made so cruel a weapon—if it lies in woman’s power to bring you to my feet, there you shall be brought—if it lies in my power to pay you back in such coin the insult and the shame you have given me to bear, then assuredly I shall pay it—every farthing! I never did aught to you,

Denzil Charteris, that deserved such treatment as this ; but now it shall be *guerre à outrance* between us ; and, if I wait for my vengeance, even twenty years, it shall be mine at last !”

Ah, poor passionate, foolish child, smarting under the first bitterness of an undeserved wrong, could you but have looked forward over half that space of twenty years, your vow would surely have never been spoken, or, being spoken, would have been cancelled even in its first rash moment of utterance !





CHAPTER III.

“**Y**OLANDE,” exclaims Enid, as she and Vi enter their sister’s room, where she is putting the finishing touches to her toilet for dinner, “What do you think Skippy is going to appear in this evening?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” says Yolande carelessly, as she fastens a white rose among the lovely ripples of her golden hair. “Not white muslin, I hope.”

“No!” laughs Vi. “Shall you ever forget that occasion? I thought I should have a fit every time I looked at her; and papa’s face of amazement too—wasn’t it rich?”

“I wonder,” remarks Yolande musingly, “whether a very fat woman or a very thin one looks worse in white.”

"A thin one in my experience," says Enid. "Yolande, how nicely you have done your hair to-night ! I wish I was old enough to wear mine turned up. It must be jolly to be grown up after all. Don't you think so ?"

"I haven't found it particularly agreeable yet," answers Yolande, still scrutinising her lovely little person in the glass. "But you haven't told me what Skippy's dress is to be."

"It is all red silk," chime in both girls simultaneously ; and then Vi adds, "It is an orange-red that makes one shudder to behold ; and she's got a turban-cap to match it, made by herself, Yolande. I know I shall never be able to look at her without laughing. And the dress is so straight and narrow she looks just like a long bolster. How is it some people never know what colours to wear, or what will suit them ?"

"You both look very nice," Yolande observes, as she surveys her young sisters in

turn. "Mind you must go in together, as there are so few gentlemen."

"Who's going to take you in?" asks Vi.

"Mr Hargreaves, of course."

"And Judith?"

"Oh, Mr Charteris! Papa will have to take Mrs Adair," says Yolande hurriedly.

"And Mr Adair will have to put up with Mrs Hargreaves. Poor fellow!" laughs Enid merrily.

"Fair, fat, and forty," comments Vi. "Mr Charteris is the best off after all. Judith is very nice, and she knows how to dress herself. She is rather fat, but—"

"Oh, men like fat girls!" asserts Yolande, with the experience of her seventeen years. "They call them 'crumby.'"

"Gracious!" exclaims Vi, looking ruefully at her slender proportions and the angularity of undeveloped girlhood so plainly apparent in the figures of herself and Enid. "There is not much hope for us then!"

"You surely are not thinking of conquests

already?" laughs Yolande. "Or is it the valentines that have set you to consider your respective charms?"

"You had plenty of sweethearts at our age," retorts Vi indignantly; "and in two years we shall be as old as you are now."

"Was that the bell?" exclaims Yolande, with a nervous start that sends all the blood to her face.

"Yes; and you ought to be down, oughtn't you? You're quite ready, Yolande. Why do you stand fidgeting there?"

"Do I look—I mean—am I all right?" asks Yolande hurriedly, as she glances from one bright face to the other.

"I should have worn a red rose with all that white," remarks Vi. "What do you say, Enid?"

"I should have done the same," agrees Enid. "But then, Vi, we're not Yolande; and somehow—"

Both pause and look critically at their

lovely elder sister, who does indeed look "faultily faultless" to-night.

"Somehow," agrees Vi, continuing the parable for her other self, as Enid is always called, "Yolande never looks like us; and what we would wear mightn't suit her."

"Well, I suppose that's all the satisfaction I am likely to get from you," says Yolande. "Let us therefore take the light of our countenances to the drawing-room." And, with one bashful reluctant glance at the mirror, she floats away, followed by the girls.

.
The great dim drawing-room is lighted by the soft glow of lamps, and a bright wood-fire burns in the old tiled fireplace. The perfume of hot-house flowers, of which Yolande has that morning robbed the conservatories, throws a faint subtle fragrance around. It is a beautiful old room—a room where all is harmonious, and no modern upholstery and incongruous colouring are to be found.

Mr Mervyn is standing by the fireplace

talking to a gentleman who is portly and elderly, and has a loud voice and good-humoured face. A lady, also portly, but with brown hair instead of grey, and fewer wrinkles in her good-humoured face than her spouse possesses, is holding an apparently interesting conversation with Miss Skipton, whose radiant orange tints make a bright spot of colour in the dim surrounding hues. A pretty fair-haired girl, with a marked resemblance to the obesity and good-humour of her elders, which proclaims their relationship unmistakably, sits by a small table turning over the leaves of an album. She advances with alacrity as she sees Yolande, and greets her most affectionately.

“What a love you look!” she whispers, with a good-natured appreciation that does her infinite credit, considering that all her hard-won admirers have been deserting her of late for Yolande’s superior attractions.

Yolande gives her a smile of thanks, and then hastens to greet her father and mother. In the midst of the questions and answers that

follow, the door opens and some more guests are announced.

“Now!” says Yolande inwardly, and draws her breath sharply and sets her lovely mobile face into stern composure.

No one can see beneath the surface—no one can tell how fast and painfully her heart throbs, or what a superhuman effort is required before she can utter naturally the commonplace formula,—

“Good evening, Mr Charteris.”

The man to whom this greeting is given is not very different from the ordinary run of men. He is handsome certainly; but so are dozens of his sex. He is very tall and well-made; but his face is too stern and grave to find favour with most of the fair sex. It is the face of a man who has known life and lived and suffered; there are lines of care on the grave brow and round the firm-set mouth, which the thick moustache shades, yet does not quite conceal. The eyes are the best features in the whole rugged unyouthful face;

they are large and soft, of darkest brown in colour, and shaded by long lashes that give them a certain look of languor and pathos strangely at variance with the stern expression of brow and lip.

He does not look stern now, though, as he glances down at the slim flower-faced maiden before him ; there is a faint quizzical amusement in the depths of his splendid eyes, a quiver of a smile round the corners of the grave lips. But Yolande sees neither. Her own orbs are veiled from sight by the white blue-veined lids. She withdraws her hand as soon as possible, and enters at once into conversation with pretty little Mrs Adair, and continues it until the announcement of dinner.

Then they pair off as Yolande has arranged, and she tries her best to listen and to appear interested in her own companion's conversation.

The dining-room is pleasantly warm, dim with wax-lights and perfumed with flowers. The dinner is satisfactory, and Mr Hargreaves is far too devoted a *gourmand* to waste time

on an unappreciative companion. Yolande, who is too young and too engrossed to care very much for the pleasures of the table, makes use of her eyes and ears instead.

She is separated by Arthur and Vi from Mr Charteris and Judith ; but she can see his dark stately head bending towards Judith's fair one, and every now and then catches a word or two of his deep mellow voice. Judith is flirting as lightly and brilliantly as she can ; for the admiration of any man or youth seems good unto her ; and it is a rare chance that has given Denzil Charteris over to her fascinations to-night. She is seldom critical, and, as a rule, knows how to be thankful for

“ Any gifts the gods may send.”

But she knows full well that Mr Charteris is accounted one of the handsomest and richest men in the county, and that his estate, the Priory, is a prize which many a maiden would be glad to win, even were its master far less

fascinating than he is. She does her best, therefore, "according to her lights," to make herself bewitching, and fails lamentably in her endeavour ; but of this she is ignorant.

Yolande, however, does not know this ; she sees only the bright smiles, the appealing glances, the hundred little arts that a feminine armoury supplies as weapons, and she cannot perceive that, though on one side the admiration is open and revealed, on the other it is forced and unnatural.

"What a pity Judith makes herself so conspicuous !" she thinks. "And how hot and vulgar she looks with all that colour ! Whenever she eats soup her face gets scarlet. I wonder if she knows it ? I am sure he cannot admire her. I remember he told me once—"

The thought is cut short abruptly by a word that falls clearly and distinctly on her ear, and makes her start and crimson from brow to throat—"Valentines."

"Oh, I had so many valentines !" says Judith ; and the lull of the voices around

makes her clear tones doubly distinct. "I suppose you never get anything so frivolous, or send them either, Mr Charteris?"

Oh, how Yolande strains her ears to catch the answer! But, alas, all the silent voices break into sudden eager speech, and, try how she may, she cannot hear the longed-for words!

"What a poor dinner you are making, Yolande!" says Mr Hargreaves at this juncture. "Do try some *vol-au-vent*; won't you?"

Yolande acquiesces, though she knows that to eat it is impossible. Will dinner never be over? she thinks. Slowly course succeeds course; at last she is able to draw on her gloves, catch the glance of the ladies at table, and rise.

"You know we are going to have a dance presently when the others look in?" she says to Arthur as she passes behind his chair.

"All right," answers the hopeful youth. "If we don't come soon enough, hop by yourselves."

“I shall not forget,” says Denzil Charteris softly, as he glances up at the fair young face.

She does not deign a word or glance in answer, but with all the dignity she can summon, sweeps on and out of the room.

“Perhaps he will think that a hint too,” she mutters angrily. “Why does that man always misunderstand and annoy me so?”

In the great drawing-room the ladies all settle themselves down in various attitudes of comfort, ease, and nonchalance. Yolande has coffee brought in; and then the staid butler and a pretty housemaid are directed to clear the lower half of the room for the prospective dance.

Presently a few more arrivals drop in—three or four young men, a couple of pretty girls, neighbours of the Mervyns, and much given to social gatherings of this description.

Yolande is speedily surrounded. When the gentlemen enter from the dining-room, she is the centre of a little court; and a dark

frown rests on Mr Charteris's brow as he notes the devoted attentions and ardent glances of her special admirer, Lance Stapleton. Now comes Yolande's long-looked for opportunity.

“If he thinks that odious thing has made the slightest impression upon me, he shall see his mistake,” she says, and forthwith gives such smiles and looks and attentions to her devoted swains as might indeed have turned the heads and bewildered the brains of far more susceptible youths than the *élite* of Ashbourne.

Miss Skipton, in her radiant orange-hued garments, advances presently to the piano. The elder members of the company settle down to cards at the firelit end of the long room ; the younger make bows and “request the pleasure,” and finally form without more ado into sets for the Lancers. Yolande and Lancelot Stapleton are *vis-à-vis* to Judith and Mr Charteris ; and Yolande puts forth all her witcheries, indulges in such pretty coque-

try of glance and manner, that her partner becomes utterly oblivious to the figures of the dance, and calls down upon himself the anger and rebuke of the other more rational members of the set.

While threading the intricacies of the "grand chain" Yolande and Denzil meet, and their fingers touch; involuntarily his hand clasps her own more closely and warmly than is needful.

She snatches it away, and flashes such a look of burning indignation upon the offender as might well have punished a graver offence. When next they meet, she offers only one finger for his touch. He notes the change, and, with a cool proud bow, declines the proffered favour.

When the dance is over Yolande is speedily besought for others, and with true feminine arrogance laughs and teases her little court. But Denzil Charteris never once approaches nor seeks to claim a waltz out of the many that follow. It is true he dances with no

one else, if that is any consolation ; but poor, proud, hurt Yolande is conscious that this evening is the most miserable one her glad young life has yet known.





CHAPTER IV.

WALTZ after waltz goes merrily on. If no one else is happy in that circle of dancers, at least Lance Stapleton is in the seventh heaven of bliss. Never has his lady-love smiled so sweetly on him, never has she been so gracious of word and kind of look as she is to-night ; and Lance, who has worshipped her secretly and openly since ever he can remember, begins to cherish wild and ambitious hopes, built upon her unusual kindness.

Oftener she laughs at him than at anything else—laughs at, and mocks at and teases him in a gay capricious fashion all her own ; but to-night she is different. If he only knew why !

“Yolande,” whispers Lance, as in a pause of the waltz they stand side by side, a wonderfully handsome pair in their youth and grace, “did you like my valentine?”

The words bring back a memory so sharp and pain-fraught that for the life of her Yolande cannot help the nervous flush, the sudden quiver of lip that follows the questions.

Lance sees the signs of agitation, and interprets them in his own way. Denzil Charteris, who is standing opposite, with his eyes fixed on the bright girlish face, sees them also, and is conscious of a sudden pang, a feeling of hot anger and indignation.

“Is it real or make-believe?” he asks himself. “If the latter, she is indeed a born coquette.”

“Oh, yes,” Yolande answers at last, though she is quite unaware which of her many valentines she owes to Lance, “it was very pretty!”

“And the poetry? Did you find that?”

asks Lance, emboldened by his *inamorata's* graciousness.

Yolande crimsons ; her eyes flash angrily.

"No," she says sharply ; "and if I had I should have torn it up ! You know I hate poetry !"

"Oh, Yolande—and only the other day you told me you loved it !"

"Did I ?" she says absently, as she bends her head over the buttons of her glove and fastens them with trembling fingers. "Well, I have changed my mind since 'the other day.'"

This is so like a speech of the old Yolande, the capricious, hard-to-please damsel of Lance's long worship, that he is abashed and silent.

"Had you very many ?" he asks hesitatingly.

"Heaps ! More than I could count !" returns his partner, warming into vivacity again. "I'm sure I don't know why people trouble themselves to send me so many. I don't care a fig for one of them !"

"Oh, Yolande," sighs poor Lance lugubri-

ously—"and I did so hope mine might please you a little!"

"Well, it didn't—not one of them was up to much," answers his lady-love with candid cruelty. "Shall we go on with our waltz?"

"I would much rather talk. It is so seldom I get a chance of having a talk to you now, Yolande."

"I don't want to talk. I want to dance," says Yolande quickly. "If you are tired I daresay I shall find some one else."

"Oh, no, no!" cries Lance imploringly. "I will waltz till midnight if you wish it. I only thought—"

"Never mind the thought," rejoins Yolande hastily; "that will do at any time—dancing won't."

They float off again and round the room to the strains of the plaintive German waltz which Miss Skipton is playing. Yolande dances exquisitely, and long practice has tutored Lance Stapleton into her step and style, so that it is quite a pleasure to watch

the "poetry of motion" as exemplified by both. They pass Denzil Charteris; and, as Yolande glides by with the slow, swinging movement so peculiar to herself, she raises her little head and looks full at him.

There is something so proud and defiant in the glance that it seems to bewilder him as he meets it. Half puzzled, half admiring, yet strangely reluctant, is the look with which he answers. Then the white lids droop, the fair face is turned away. She floats on and away up the long dim lamp-lit room with her young lover's arm around her slender waist, and his dark-blue eyes resting adoringly on the crown of her golden head, which barely reaches his shoulder.

Denzil Charteris bites his lip hard, and turns away with a smothered sigh.

"I wish I had never seen her!" he says.

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This is the last dance. The card-party break up. The elderly ladies remark that it is very late, and the young ones are be-

ginning to be shawled and cloaked by attendant cavaliers, whose duty it is to escort them homewards now. A chorus of good-byes and kisses resounds. Yolande is conscious of promising to meet and walk with three different individuals at the same time on the morrow, and knows in her own heart that she has no intention of meeting any. Then she watches them defile away down the long avenue, exclaiming on the wonderful mildness and beauty of the night.

It is indeed very lovely, thinks Yolande. The grass sward, all turned to silver by the moon-rays, slopes invitingly before her. Not a breath of air is stirring. The stars are thickly studded in the dim deep blue of the sky, like jewels strewn and scattered by a royal hand. The girl looks and longs—looks again, and then snatches up a white thick fleecy shawl from a stand close by and steps forth, alone and unseen, into the calm, still, moon-lit grounds.

Her fevered pulse grows calm, her heart

throbs less fitfully and painfully, a great peace and softness comes over her, and her eyes lose the hard passionate glitter they have hitherto held. She cannot quite analyse the reasons for the change ; but she feels it and rejoices in it. Slowly she moves over the dewy grass, with the pale light on her white figure, and so on till she finds herself in the dark dim avenue where the branches stretch ghostlike overhead.

“ Miss Mervyn ! ” a voice suddenly says, in close proximity to herself.

Yolande starts and cries out in faint alarm.

“ Don’t be frightened ; it is only I ; ” and, glancing up, she sees Denzil Charteris beside her.

“ Have you come for a moonlight walk ? ” he asks.

At sight of his face, at sound of his voice, all the hardness and coldness come back to Yolande. She draws her slight figure up to its full height, her eyes look straight before her.

"Yes," she says curtly.

"It is a beautiful night, wonderfully mild for this time of the year," resumes her companion.

"I suppose so."

He looks at her with keen scrutiny. He knows full well how unusual it is for her to frame such curt cold sentences as these.

"You enjoyed yourself very much to-night, I suppose?" he says next.

"Very much indeed," answers Yolande, with aggressive heartiness.

"I suppose you think there is nothing so delightful as dancing?"

"Yes; I think there are many other things I like as well," returns Yolande.

"Flirting, I suppose?"

"Solitude, when I have a disagreeable companion," she retorts.

"I beg your pardon," he says haughtily. "I suppose I am to take that as a hint. Unfortunately our paths lie together if you are going to the lodge gates, as seems to be your intention."

"Yes, I am," says Yolande, a little ashamed of her rudeness.

"Then how shall we manage? Shall I go first, or will you?"

"Don't be so ridiculous," answers the girl, with an involuntary smile. "I wonder," she continues rapidly, as she looks up at the dark gloomy face beside her—"I wonder, Mr Charteris, why you and I always disagree?"

"I am singularly unfortunate," he says, with chill politeness. "I suppose you never quarrel with other people?"

"Never!" affirms Yolande heartily. "I hate quarrelling!"

"Can we not make a compact of amity then?" he asks, his voice softening involuntarily as he looks down at the lovely face with the soft fleecy wool framing the ruffled golden hair.

Her eyes look up quickly, a little wilfulness and animosity flashing in their glance.

"We should never keep it," she says. "I don't think you and I could ever agree—for long."

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“And why?”

“Because—oh, well, it is difficult to say!—because we have been antagonistic from the very first, I suppose.”

“And whose fault was that?” he asks very softly.

“Certainly not mine,” is the hasty answer; and the little wilful beauty flashes new defiance at her companion’s questioning eyes.

“Nor mine,” he says coldly. “I certainly took upon myself to give you a piece of advice—for which you asked, remember—and, it not being quite sugared enough for your taste, you forthwith said some of the very rudest things it has ever been my lot to hear.”

“You annoyed me so,” pouts Yolande. “I—I hate being lectured.”

He smiles faintly.

“I should not think of taking it upon myself to lecture you, Miss Yolande; I merely gave you—”

“Yes, yes, I know!” exclaims Yolande

hurriedly, wondering in her heart all the time how it is that her name never sounded so sweet before as it did just now when his lips uttered it. "We won't go over the old ground again, please. Of course I know you despise all girls, and think us a frivolous, silly set of beings ; but all the same—"

"Why don't you finish your very untrue remarks ?"

"All the same there are other people who hold different views," Yolande continues angrily, "and don't expect to find old heads on young shoulders."

"That is an anomaly of which I have not the faintest expectation," he says, smiling. "I am afraid the combination would be lamentable in its results. Are not you ?"

"I—I—know I am not clever," persists Yolande, with a dangerous break in her clear young voice, "or accomplished, or anything of that sort ; but still no one ever appeared to think I was quite so hateful and useless a being before."

“And who thinks anything so improbable now?”

“Why you!” she cries, forgetful of dignity and composure and everything else. “You know you do—at least you manage to convey such sentiments with tolerable clearness.”

“Good Heaven, child!” he exclaims in unfeigned astonishment, “what do you mean?”

His voice and look bring Yolande back to her senses. She struggles hard for composure, inwardly furious that she has so far forgotten herself as to let him see that his opinions are of any value.

“Not that I care the least bit in the world what you think,” she adds with slight emphasis. “We are not likely to be anything more than ordinary acquaintances; and it is only my friends’ opinions for which I care.”

“Indeed!”

The sarcastic tone cuts her to the quick. Her face turns very white.

“I must be going back now,” she says quietly. “We are almost at the gates.”

He stops and confronts her, looking down at her face with a strange and wistful expression on his own.

“I suppose you are right,” he says quietly.
“We could never be—friends!”

Then he takes her reluctant hand, presses it for a second's space between his own, and turns away abruptly.

Yolande stands quite still where he has left her. All the colour has gone out of her sweet face and trembling lips. She clasps her small hands tightly together, as if in sudden pain.


“What is it?” she murmurs unconsciously.
“Whenever we meet we cannot agree for a moment; yet, when he leaves me, something—the best part of myself, I think—goes with him.”

And she too turns away and is lost in the shadows.





CHAPTER V.

HE Mervyns are not a very remarkable family. They are certainly possessed of a name ancient and worthy of honour, and Mervyn Court is considered a fine old place by all admirers of Elizabethan architecture. Its present possessor, however, is not overburdened with means, and finds it no easy matter to keep up the Court and its surroundings, as tradition has decreed they ought to be kept up. The stables have fewer horses than of yore ; the carriages have been reduced to one old-fashioned barouche. The staff of men-servants have fallen to the butler, gardener, and coachman.

Money-troubles are not unknown to the

venerable owner of Mervyn Court, though he keeps them to himself, and never seeks to deny any of his children one single desire of their hearts in consequence.

“Yolande will marry well,” he thinks often, as he looks at the brilliant beauty of his cherished first-born, “and for the others I can manage.”

He thinks it again one bright spring morning as the three girls are standing on the steps leading to the terrace, awaiting the arrival of a waggonette in which Mr Hargreaves and Judith have promised to convey them to a pic-nic in Beechhampton Woods.

They are all in high spirits. Miss Skipton is not required to chaperon them, as Mrs Hargreaves has promised to do all that is needful in that line. Enid and Vivien are brimful of excitement, as this is the first “grown-up” gaiety in which they have yet participated, and they expect great things from it. Yolande is quieter, but even she is conscious of a pleasurable thrill at the

thought of long lovely hours in wood and field—even she feels her cheeks flush, her eyes brighten, as she stands drinking in the warm scented air and revelling in the bounteous wealth of sunshine.

Spring has come early this year, following close on those mild soft February days. It is April now, but April rich in tints and colours, lavish in leaf and blossom, full-handed with floral treasures and fragrant scents. Every bank is starred with purple-hearted violets and dainty hyacinths, trees are bursting into leaf, delicate blossoms sway in the soft warm air. All the young leaves wave and the young birds sing, and the pulse of life beats strong and rich in the veins of the blossoming earth as well as in those of human life.

Yolande and her father are pacing, arm in arm, over the smooth green sward. She looks like an embodiment of spring herself, for her dress is of white muslin over the palest most delicate shade of green, and her hat is wreathed with daisies, while a bunch

of the same flowers are fastened at her throat. The faint misty hues of her robe contrast to perfection with her delicate face, her bright hair, her sweet crimson lips. No wonder is it that her father's eyes rest so admiringly on her, as they move side by side in the warm rich flood of sunshine that is poured so lavishly over earth and sky to-day.

"There is the waggonette at last," he says, as the sound of wheels comes up the drive. "I hope you will enjoy yourself, my darling. Take care that the girls don't get into mischief."

"Oh, yes," smiles Yolande, as she glances up towards the two restless blue-gowned maidens who are eagerly watching the approach of the looked-for vehicle, "I will take care of them, papa! I see you are beginning to look upon me as a staid elderly sister. Not so very long ago you would have asked some one to look after me."

"You used to be so very wild in those days," he answers, looking tenderly at the

bright face. "You have grown much quieter of late, Yolande. Do you know that?"

"I am sure you ought to be thankful," she says, turning slightly away from the anxious, questioning eyes that are bent upon her face. "I believe you thought I should always be a perfect hoyden, papa."

"No, my dear; I judged you better than that. Your faults were only those of exuberant youth and perfect health and buoyant spirits. You will be never the worse woman, Yolande, though you were once so wild and mischievous a girl!"

She is silent. Deep down in her young untutored heart is a well of intense feeling. When strongly moved her glib and heedless tongue is slow to find words; and she is so moved now.

She clasps her father's arm with a sudden closer pressure.

"Darling," she says softly, "you are always much too good to me."

Then the waggonette stops close beside

them, and Mrs Hargreaves's hearty voice rings cheerily out in welcome.

After much talking, laughing, and advising, the party settle down. The luncheon-basket, which the Court party contribute to the festive gathering, is handed in. The girls kiss their hands, the old white-haired man waves his in response; then they are off, whirling away through the delicious sunshine, over smooth white roads, through shady lanes, where primroses bloom in grassy tufts, and tender fronds of young green ferns uncoil themselves, past cottages where rose-thorns bud and trailing creepers are stirred by the wings of nesting birds—on and on, with the blue sky overhead and the loveliness of nature strewn broadcast over wood and lane and hedgerow—on and on, till the road grows narrower and the shade denser, and they pause at length by the appointed rendezvous, where the other members of the pic-nic party are awaiting them.

They are rather a large party, and there is

a goodly sprinkling of the eligible youth of the neighbourhood, and also a small complement of the military from the adjacent town of Colston. Plenty of pretty girls are scattered about, anxious dowagers are giving longing glances at the provision-basket, a few elderly gentlemen discuss the weather, with that proverbial disbelief in its fair promises born of many pic-nics. Then an excursion to the ruins of Beechhampton Castle is agreed upon, and the pleasure-seekers are forthwith marshalled into pairs or parties, as seems most desirable to all concerned; and, having agreed upon a place and hour for luncheon, they depart.

Yolande is attended by her faithful adorer Lance Stapleton, but she foils his intention of securing a *tête-à-tête* by a glance of invitation at a certain Captain Deringham, who has been recently introduced to her, and who is by no means backward in responding to her unspoken command for his society. In his private opinion she is by far the loveliest girl

there; and he is not a little pleased and flattered that she should favour him.

He is a little man, with an abnormally large opinion of himself and his fascinating qualities. It does not therefore surprise him when Yolande appears to enjoy his frivolous conversation and vapid compliments. It adds only one more feather to his cap, one more laurel to his already plentiful assortment.

Poor Lance has a bad time of it! Yolande is employing her mischievous wits in what is popularly known as "trotting out" her by no-means backward admirer, and fools him so exquisitely that even Lance grows disgusted with his conceit and affectation, and feels half angered at Yolande's wicked enjoyment of it all. It is with a sigh of intense relief that he at last hails the sight of the ruins, and sees the other members of the party exploring them in every direction.

He waits for a moment to disentangle some forlorn damsel's train from the embraces of a wild rose-bush near by, and then hastens to

rejoin his former companions. They are nowhere to be seen. Vexed and impatient at losing Yolande—for he had made up his mind to be her guide through the deserted chambers of the old castle—he hurries on, looking right and left for the radiant figure of his enchantress—but in vain. Nowhere can he see her; and with a hopeless sigh he resigns himself to his fate and pilots Enid and Vi in her stead. After all it is something to have the scent of the rose, if not the rose itself.

Meanwhile Yolande has, by an ingenious stratagem, got rid of her enamoured captain; and, light as a bird on the wing, she flits in solitary delight through the ruined hall, the moss-grown corridors and gloomy broken stairways of the castle.

It is an eerie place—a place of which many a legend ghastly and terrible has been told. Yolande knows little enough about it, save that in by-gone years it had belonged to the Charteris family, and had been wrested

from their possession by foul and treacherous means. From one tower can be seen the more modern dwelling-place of its whilom owners—a lofty, stately pile, built on the west side of the park, and now belonging to Denzil Charteris, the last of his line. It may be for these reasons that Yolande wishes to make her investigations in solitude; in any case she feels that the vapid commonplace talk and endless love-making which always seem to be her lot would here be out of place.

“I should like to have gone over it all with — him,” she says softly, as she flits with light steps up the moss-grown stairway leading to the tower. “I wonder where he is. I have not seen him for so long. Not that I care for his absence, but—”

The thought is checked abruptly. She finds herself in a narrow gloomy turret with loop-holes of windows that give a bird’s-eye view of all the country round. So striking and beautiful does the scene look that the

girl stands in breathless admiration, gazing before her with tireless eyes.

Presently she glances round. The turret is quite bare and desolate enough to chill any venturesome spirit that has wandered hither in search of adventure.

“Just a place for ghosts,” thinks Yolande, and laughs aloud.

As the pretty silvery sound echoes through the silent space, she starts at the incongruousness of it in contrast with the nature of her surroundings. The echo has scarcely died away when she hears a strange noise behind her. She starts and turns swiftly. Her cheeks blanch, her blood seems curdling, a fearful numbing horror seizes her. She sees a small door opened in the wall, which reveals a tiny room, furnished more like a prison cell than aught else. But it is not the room or the unexpected discovery of its existence that holds her spell-bound and powerless in her terrible fear. It is the sight of a face looking at her through the doorway—a face bloodless,

ghastly, with nothing human or lifelike about it—a face with fierce, dark gleaming eyes that hold her own in a fascinated horrible gaze—a face with matted hair hanging in loose unkempt locks over a haggard brow and around ghastly cheeks.

Yolande stands silent, still, powerless. In that one moment all the horror and agony of a lifetime seem pent up. If she could only scream, or move, or speak ! But she cannot.

Suddenly the awful figure advances—the long claw-like hands are outstretched as if to seize her. The sight gives her back some faint strength amid this fearful paralysis of horror. She makes one frantic spring, pursued by the awful being behind her ; a shriek wild and agonising bursts from her lips ; then she is clutched as in a vice, and a horrible gibing, mocking voice grates on her ear. She feels herself falling, falling, she knows not whither. Then all is blank.





CHAPTER VI.

WHEN Yolande recovers consciousness she finds herself still in the turret. Her brow is wet, her hair is unloosed, and ripples over her shoulders and half way to her feet, like a shower of molten gold.

She starts and shivers. Her frightened eyes gaze wildly round, and finally rest on the grave, anxious face that is bent so tenderly over her. It is the face of Denzil Charteris.

Swiftly she withdraws herself from his supporting arm and springs to her feet.

"You here?" she exclaims in amazement.

"I am afraid you have been frightened," he says, eagerly. "How imprudent of you to leave the others and come here by yourself!"

Her wild eyes glance round, with still the awful fear in their depths.

“What was it?” she asks timidly. “What awful thing did I see? Oh, take me away from here! I shall die with terror if it comes again!”

He turns very pale at the words.

“You—what did you see?” he stammers.

Yolande shudders.

“See?” she exclaims. “Oh, it was horrible! Is this tower inhabited, Mr Charteris, or—haunted?”

“Try to compose yourself,” he says soothingly. “There is nothing to fear now. Perhaps it was the bats you heard, or the mice—the walls are full of them.”

“Bats!” cries Yolande indignantly. “Do you think I am a baby, to be frightened by mere sounds? No, Mr Charteris; bats haven’t faces and hands like claws, and— Oh, take me away, take me away!” she breaks off imploringly. “I wish I had never come here!”

Without a word he draws her trembling hand through his arm and leads her away, speaking only soothing words to win her back to calmness once more.

At the foot of the staircase he pauses.

“Pardon me,” he says, “but do you not think it would be better to be silent as regards your—your alarm—to the others? I should not like the ruins to be turned into a show for idle curiosity, or form food for the tales of gaping rustics. It would be doing me a great favour if you would not mention this to any one else.”

Yolande looks at him in undisguised amazement.

“I don’t know why I should do you a favour,” she says slowly and defiantly. “You have but little right to ask it. Besides, if I am questioned as to what I saw in the turret—”

“You are quite sure you did see something then?” he asks, nervously.

“Mr Charteris, what do you take me for?”

demands the girl indignantly—"a fool or an idiot? Of course I saw something! I was frightened out of my senses! What is the mystery about that horrible place? I am sure there is something, or you would not be so anxious for me to conceal it."

He draws a long breath; his dark face grows strangely white and stern.

"You are right," he says—"there is a mystery; but it is hardly fair, I suppose, to expect one of your sex to keep silent respecting it, merely because I ask it as a favour to myself. I cannot give any reasons. I can only trust to your generosity—if you have any," he adds bitterly.

The momentary softness dies out of Yolande's face; her eyes glow darkly and defiantly once more.

"As you have such a bad opinion of me, I wonder you condescend to make such a request," she says coldly.

"A bad opinion of you!" he echoes, looking with burning, passionate eyes down

at the white proud beauty of her face. "If I had, I should be a happier man than I am to-day!"

The words are so startling that Yolande is speechless. Her eyes droop, the colour comes and goes with nervous speed in her downcast face. Suddenly she remembers her hair, and with crimson cheeks begins to plait up the shimmering fleece that enfolds her like a mantle. Her trembling fingers can scarcely hold its weight; but at last she manages to twist it round and round her little head.

Denzil Charteris looks on silently, with eyes in which reluctant admiration lingers. He does not say a word in praise of its beauty, and Yolande is conscious of being disappointed that he is thus reticent.

"Do I look like a reasonable being again?" she asks, as she fastens her hat and glances shyly up at her companion.

"Quite," he says coldly. "I hope you are ready to face your party again?"

“Oh, yes!” answers the girl hurriedly. “I am sure they must wonder what has become of me all this long time.”

“Shall we go?” he asks; but he does not offer his arm or hand now, and the fire and warmth have all died out of his face; leaving it sterner, colder, harder than ever.

Yolande merely gives a nod of acquiescence; and they emerge together into the radiant sunshine and hear the voices and laughter of their fellow-beings around them once more.

“I feel as if I had been in some ogre’s castle!” laughs Yolande, looking back at the frowning walls and mildewed steps and broken windows behind them. “By-the-way, Mr Charteris, I quite forgot to ask how you came here, and—”

“How I found you? I will tell you later on,” he says hurriedly.

Yolande looks up with a mischievous smile. All her spirits and gaiety have returned again; her alarm is almost forgotten.

“Don’t forget,” she says. “And now, good-bye. I am going to retail my adventures in the turret to everybody.”

She flashes one provoking brilliant glance at his offended face, and then hurries off to join her sisters.

“Does she mean it?” mutters Denzil Charteris to himself. “Oh, Heaven, to think that she, of all persons, should have seen—that!”

His eyes grow dark with pain; a heavy sigh leaves his tight-pressed lips.

“How lovely she is!” he thinks, as his unwilling gaze follows the beautiful little figure. “Will a day ever come when I shall be to you what you have all unwittingly become to me—my Lady Coquette?”

.
“Did he think I was in earnest?” says Yolande to herself, an hour after her adventure.

The whole party are sitting at luncheon. It is spread on the cool green sward, under

the shade of a group of beech-trees. Yolande leans against the trunk of one, her hat tossed negligently beside her, her eyes fixed on a tiny glade that opens on the opposite side of the wood, all thickly powdered now with dainty forest flowers, and gay with falling bars of sunshine that play at hide-and-seek among the pale green leaves.

Coming up this glade are Denzil Charteris and a lady—a lady whom Yolande never remembers to have seen before, but who looks as beautiful a vision as the eye could desire to rest upon, so stately is she and so fair.

“Who is that?” inquires Yolande sharply of her neighbour, Doctor Deane.

“Who? What?” exclaims the gentleman addressed, with a nervous start that sends the spoonful of lobster salad to which he is helping himself on to the dish instead of his plate.

“That lady over there in the white dress, walking with Mr Charteris?”

Doctor Deane puts up his eyeglass and looks in the direction indicated.

"That lady?" he says. "Don't you know? She is Mrs Ray. She is on a visit at the Priory. She is a cousin of Mr Charteris."

"Oh, married!" remarks Yolande, relieved, she scarcely knows why, by the information.

"She is a widow now," says her companion. "She was a very beautiful girl. Every one said Charteris and she were to make a match of it. However, they never did. Can I give you some pigeon-pie, Miss Mervyn?"

"Thanks," says Yolande languidly, as she toys with the contents of her plate, and for a moment relapses into silence.

"I suppose she is his ideal," she thinks half angrily—"calm, cold, stately; there is no fear of his ever calling her a coquette."

"Do you know all the history of the Charteris family, Doctor Deane?" she says aloud presently.

"Oh, yes, my dear, yes!" answers the

good-humoured old doctor, who has lived at Ashbourne for the greater part of his life, and attended the little Mervyns in every illness that it has been their lot to suffer.

“ Was the Priory really theirs once ? ”

“ Certainly it was. It belonged to a Sir Hubert Charteris, who was a Royalist, and fell in the battle of Worcester. Then Cromwell took it and gave it to one of his followers ; and it never came back again to the Charteris line for nearly two centuries.”

“ How is it that the title is extinct ? ” inquires Yolande.

“ It is a long story. The last owner of it, Sir Denzil Charteris—you start !—yes, it is the same name. Well, he was a great man in his day, and fought loyally for king and country. He had wedded a lady of great rank and wonderful beauty. He loved her very fondly. That love cost him dear ; for her family held opposite sides to his own. They were troublous times those, and often a man’s foes were the members of his own

household. This was a case. The Lady Edythe had a lover, and for his sake she won a great State secret from her husband and betrayed it. He was flung into the Tower, and languished there for long. While he was there his wife fled to a foreign land with the villain, whose treachery was doubled by the fact of kinship. Sir Denzil had a son, a little lad of seven years; and his one prayer was that the child might be given him to cheer his last moments of solitude and durance. They granted him the request; and the boy came, and for many dreary months was the solace of his bitter hours and hopeless inertia. Meanwhile his trial went on. Those whom he had served and honoured, those in whose cause his blood had been shed, his whole possessions given, were now only too ready to disbelieve and speak ill of him. At last his sentence was pronounced—the scaffold! One day he loosed his child's arms from around his neck and told him, as best he could, his bitter history.

‘A time will come,’ he said, ‘when my honour will be cleared, when those who condemn so readily now will know who is traitor and who not. Of this, my son, be sure—that the titles we lose to-day and the possessions we forfeit, will yet be pressed back upon our race as atonement for the wrongs I have suffered. Take this, my last charge. What is ours by right you may claim and keep; but not one title they have withdrawn, not one rood of land they have confiscated, shall heir of mine accept from his father’s murderers.’ And no Charteris has ever done so. The little child lived to see justice rendered to the name he had loved and honoured; but no entreaty would induce him to accept compensation for the undeserved wrong. All the lands and titles that had been added to their original possessions were declined thenceforward. The Priory fell to ruins, as you see, and the lands that the Charteris’s now hold are not one-tenth of their original possessions.”

Yolande had listened with intense eagerness to the story.

“How sad!” she says at last; and the old doctor wonders why her face is so pale now. He does not know what strong and touching interest that recital of by-gone wrongs possessed, invested as it was with the name that held so singular a charm for her, despite all efforts at rebellion.

With an unwonted softness in their depths her eyes turned towards Denzil Charteris. Looking up at that moment he catches the musing glance, with all its silent, eloquent appeal. But now no answering softness speaks back from his own.

“It is only another art,” he says, and sighs, and devotes himself more assiduously than ever to his companion.





CHAPTER VII.

IT is by no means the most comfortable thing in the world to eat one's food on the grass. Picturesque and unusual it may be, and therefore possessing charms for youth and inexperience—certainly not for age and reason. The picnic party are fairly gay; the usual *con-tretemps* are perpetrated and laughed over; the champagne is exhilarating, and makes amends for other drawbacks. The sun still continues to warm with benignant bounty the old, who rejoice in its comforting beams, and the young, who let its rays flicker unguardedly over uncovered heads and bright cheeks and delicate complexions.

Luncheon is over at last; and the party

get up and stroll about, or linger under the trees, or stray off in couples, as suits best their respective ideas of comfort and enjoyment.

Yolande sits thoughtfully in her place, declining all offers and invitations to exchange it, or walk off with an attendant swain, as most of the Dulcineas and Chloes are doing.

“I want to be alone,” she says, pettishly ; and at last she gets her wish.

She leans back with half-closed eyes ; the sunbeams play on her bright hair ; a butterfly, tempted by the warmth to make an early *début* in life, flutters idly up and down before her, now poised on a leaf, now revelling in the sunlight, or mounting high into mid-air on some golden ladder formed by the slanting rays. It is all so bright and fair and still that Yolande hardly wonders at the somniferous tendencies of the elder members of the party, and even closes her own white lids—“only to think,” she says.

The thought must have been a long one, for at last she opens them with a start. Voices in the rear are talking eagerly.

“Is it really true? It seems too horrible!” says one.

“It is perfectly true. I had it on the best authority,” answers another. “The two brothers were very fond of each other, and they both lived together always. Denzil was the younger, as you know. But when Hubert brought his wife home to the Priory, all the old love and friendship was broken up. She and Denzil fell in love. How far things had gone no one knew; but at last Hubert discovered it, and the shock was so awful that he killed himself—was found, with the pistol in his hand, lying dead one summer morning.”

“And the wife?” interrogates the first voice eagerly.

“That is the mysterious part of it, my dear. She disappeared from that moment. No one ever knew what became of her. It

was a terrible scandal, of course, and the Priory was shut up and Denzil went away for years and years. He has been quite changed ever since. They say he will never marry. He hates women."

Yolande rises to her feet weak and faint.

The story she has unwittingly heard seems horrible. She longs to get away from human voices and human eyes, and all the cruel necessary conventionalities of life. She longs for solitude as she never has longed for it before. Blindly she rushes on through the woodland glades, her heart throbbing wildly her pulses quivering. Her light skirts brush the tapestry of delicate flowers and emerald moss, her hair catches the sunbeams and reflects their brightness, the birds twitter and call from bough to bough—but she is heedless of every sight and sound.

Suddenly she pauses in her headlong career, as if turned to stone. Not half-a-dozen yards ahead she sees the figure of a man lying face downwards on the cold green sward—a man

whose frame is shaken by voiceless sobs, whose whole attitude betokens a tearless, terrible despair. She knows only too well who he is.

Awed and trembling and abashed, the girl stands and looks through the parted boughs. Her face pales, her lips quiver. Never in her life has she seen grief like this borne or suffered by living man.

Then she draws back and goes away with noiseless steps and dry and burning eyes.

"Is it for her he grieves—even now?" she says.

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"Yolande! Where is Yolande?" asks Enid impatiently.

The stragglers are being collected, and the various conveyances are in waiting to bear their respective freights homewards in the cool evening hour. Vi and Enid stand by Mrs Hargreaves's side, waiting somewhat impatiently for their truant sister.

"Really Yolande has behaved very badly to-day," says the fair plump Judith, as she

stands drawing on her gloves. "She has been constantly disappearing at odd moments, and just when she's most wanted."

"Perhaps she is going home with some one else?" suggests Mrs Hargreaves, who is tired and a little cross, and beginning to long for her comfortable chair and customary cup of tea. "Do you think we ought to wait, my dears? Everyone else is going, you see."

"Oh, but we cannot leave without Yolande!" cry the twins simultaneously.

"Still it is very tiresome," adds Vi. "I can't think where she can be. She knew we were all to leave at six o'clock."

"There is some one coming now," exclaims Enid.

"It is only Mr Charteris," says Judith, quietly. "Perhaps he will go and look for her. I will ask him."

"Oh, no! There she is at last!" cries Vi, eagerly. "I can see her dress in the opening of that glade opposite."

"They are close upon each other's heels at

all events," says Judith, a little ill-naturedly, for Denzil Charteris has not bestowed on her to-day any of the attentions which her soul loveth, and she is inclined to resent the absence of those *petits soins* to which he has accustomed her of late.

"And here comes Mrs Ray, too," interposes Enid. "I suppose Mr Charteris will drive her back. I wonder why her mother did not come with her to-day. She is also at the Priory."

"Because she was a sensible woman, I suppose," answers Mrs Hargreaves, a little bitterly.

"Now don't be cross, mamma," interposes her daughter; "I am sure you have had a very pleasant day, and no single cause for complaint. Well, Yolande," she adds loudly, as that young lady comes up, "so here you are at last!"

"I hope I have not kept you waiting long," says Yolande, apologetically. "I am sorry. I forgot all about the time."

"You are only half-an-hour late," remarks Judith composedly.

"I really am very sorry," begins Yolande, blushing and confused.

"Oh, never mind! We all know time is apt to play strange tricks when one is pleasantly occupied!" Judith interrupts with a meaning glance at Denzil Charteris, who is standing close beside them now.

"I was quite alone," says Yolande, indignantly.

"Oh, indeed!" answers Judith, with polite incredulity. "Well, suppose you get in, instead of arguing the reasons of your late arrival. We are to go home as we came, I suppose?" she adds interrogatively.

"Yolande," says an eager voice at this juncture, "I have been looking everywhere for you! Do let me drive you back!"

"Oh, no!" cries Yolande, shrinking away from the touch and voice of her fervent admirer Lance, with instinctive dislike of

his suggestion. "I would much rather go with Mrs Hargreaves."

At this moment Denzil Charteris approaches, his beautiful cousin by his side.

"Mrs Hargreaves," he says, "I am going to ask a great favour of you. The wheel of my trap is loose, and I am obliged to ride home. Have you a spare seat in your wagonette for Mrs Ray? You would oblige us exceedingly if you would drop her at the Priory."

"Oh, certainly!" acquiesces Mrs Hargreaves, only too eager to oblige so important a personage as Mr Charteris. "Yolande can go with Lance Stapleton, and your cousin is welcome to her seat."

"I hope it will not inconvenience Miss Mervyn," begins Denzil Charteris hesitatingly; "if so—"

"Oh, not in the least!" exclaims Yolande, with feigned cheerfulness. "I shall be delighted to go with Mr Stapleton."

"Of that I have no doubt," returns Denzil

haughtily ; but a keen pang runs through his heart as he sees the girl turn away with a careless nod to the surrounding group and disappear, under the delighted escort of her youthful adorer.

Lance possesses a gig with a high-stepping horse, and into this vehicle he helps Yolande with a speed and alacrity which look as if he feared she would change her mind. Then he springs in beside her.

“ Crack goes the whip,
Round go the wheels,”

and they are off. They pass the waggonette where beautiful Mrs Ray is occupying Yolande's place ; they pass Denzil Charteris astride on his black hack Eblis. Lance whips up his steed, and off they fly at a sharp trot over the white stretching road, while the cool evening air sweeps by, fanning Yolande's hot cheeks and rustling the young leaves overhead.

She likes the rapid motion, and with a

little satisfied sigh leans back on her high perch.

"Are you comfortable?" asks Lance presently.

"Oh, yes—quite!" answers his companion. "Why are you slackening speed?"

"I am afraid we shall be home too soon," he says tenderly.

"We can't be home too soon to please me," rejoins Yolande. "I am so tired."

"Tired! I never heard you complain of that before, whatever you have gone through. Did you not enjoy yourself?"

"Oh, yes," answers the girl, with forced cheerfulness, "very much! But pic-nics are rather a bore, don't you think?"

"Once you said they were the most delightful form of enjoyment. How fickle you are, Yolande! Do you ever hold the same opinion for two days together?"

"I am afraid not. I can't help it. I get tired of everything and everybody."

"Oh, Yolande!"

One of her little hands lies ungloved on the leather apron of the gig. Lance suddenly shifts the reins to his right hand and seizes it in his left. An angry light flashes into the girl's face. She hurriedly snatches it away.

"Don't!" she says sharply.

"Do you grudge me even so small a favour as that?" he asks sadly, looking down at her with a pained, humble look in his grey eyes. "Yolande, why are you so changed from what you were a year ago?"

"Am I changed?" she says wearily.

"Indeed, yes. You were so kind and true; and, though you did tease me sometimes—"

"Oh, for goodness' sake, Lance, don't talk such nonsense!" cries Yolande impatiently.

"A year ago! Why, I was a child then!"

"Were you?" he says sadly. "I don't know. I suppose you were; but I loved you just as dearly as I do now, Yolande."

"I am sure I wish you wouldn't," the girl returns nervously. "You know I have told you again and again it is of no use. I look

upon you as a brother, Lance ; you have seemed to me just like one ever since we played cricket together in the meadows at Mervyn. Why can't you be satisfied with things as they are, and not want to change them ? ”

“ You know very well—why. If you cared for me as I do for you, Yolande, you would not be able to let things remain as they are.”

“ I can't help my feelings. Liking and loving are not in one's own hands,” answers Yolande pettishly.

“ And you don't like me at all ? ”

“ Oh, yes, I do—better than anyone else I know ! ” she says cheerfully.

“ But not as I mean—not as I love you, Yolande ? ”

“ It is quite impossible for me to gauge the depth and extent of your feelings, Lance,” she says lightly. “ I certainly never think of you when you are out of sight ; neither do I care very much whether you are with me or not. But I know you are very good

and kind, and I know too," she adds, with sudden bitterness, "that it would be a hundred times better for me if I could care for you than—"

"Than what?" he asks fiercely. "Not anyone else, Yolande? Oh, don't say there is anyone else!"

"That is so very likely!" exclaims Yolande sarcastically. "Ashbourne abounds with eligible swains, men for whom one could care even if one tried. Pshaw, Lance, don't suppose anything so utterly impossible!"

"I am glad it is impossible," answers the unfortunate wooer, with intense relief—"glad, because as long as you care for no one else, Yolande, I shall never quite despair. It seems impossible that all the love I bear for you should have no return. And I can be very patient, dear."

"You poor boy!" exclaims Yolande pityingly. "I wish I could give you some hope; but I am sure I shall never alter."

"But you are so young, Yolande; and to

some natures love does not come all at once ; its approach is gradual and imperceptible."

"Is it?" says Yolande, with a strange bitter little laugh. "Well, with me love is decidedly in the imperceptible stage just now."

"I wonder if I could do anything to make you care for me?" says Lance, musingly.

"I think if you were to go away and never bother me it would be best," suggests Yolande ; "or perhaps you could be very unkind, or fickle, or—make me jealous even. But you see it is rather wearying, this one-sided courtship, and you have always been so absurdly fond of me!"

"Heaven knows, Yolande, I would alter if I could! It is cruel of you to mock at a man's honest lifelong devotion. Perhaps a day may come when you will value a true heart as it deserves, and then—"

"Then shall I come to you, Lance?" she says softly.

"Oh, my darling, my darling," he cries

rapturously, "if you only would, if you only would!"

He has checked the horse suddenly, and the gig stands motionless on the moonlit road. He bends towards Yolande in the impulse of the moment; his eyes gaze passionately on the lovely flower-like face; then he snatches the little white ungloved hands and kisses them with swift tremulous kisses—not once or twice, but many times. Ere Yolande can recover from the surprise and suddenness of such behaviour, the sharp quick trot of a horse's hoofs sounds in their rear. An instant afterwards Mr Charteris passes the waiting vehicle, having been an evident witness of the little scene enacted therein.

Yolande's face grows crimson with vexation and annoyance. She snatches her hands away from her lover's grasp, and her soft eyes flash bitter wrath at his pleading face.

"How dare you make such an exhibition of me out here in the open road?" she cries

furiously. "I wish I had never come with you at all!"

Poor Lance draws back, white and hurt and penitent.

"I beg your pardon," he says humbly. "I really could not help it. You looked so—so lovely!"

"Will you be kind enough to leave my looks alone and drive on?" says Yolande icily. "I think your conduct is most impertinent."

The young man gnaws his fair moustache in silent vexation. He fears he must indeed have given dire offence to his lady-love before she could speak in those cold measured tones to him. He drives on in silence; and Yolande is too angry and indignant at the thought of what has occurred to take the slightest notice of his presence for the rest of the drive.

"What must he think? What must he think?" she says to herself over and over again.

And the "he" alluded to is certainly not

the man in such close proximity to her own fair self.

The vexed question is still far from settled when they reach the lodge gates and she finds herself at home once more. She scarcely deigns to touch Lance's proffered hand as he assists her down, and with a curt "Good night" she passes into the house.

"I have never spent such a miserable day in my life!" she says, as, with hot cheeks and shaking hand, she divests herself of her hat and jacket in the welcome solitude of her own room.





CHAPTER VIII.

FOR a week after the pic-nic Yolande sees nothing of Denzil Charteris. Matters go on quietly and uneventfully at the Court. Miss Skipton still perseveringly endeavours to initiate Yolande into the mysteries of housekeeping. Vi and Enid still persist in playing tricks and ingeniously tormenting their faithful monitress. Arthur has gone back to school, and peace and quiet reign in his stead.

One morning Yolande is employed in what she terms "practising," but it is nothing better than an idle occasional touch of the keys, while her thoughts are busy dreaming over far different subjects from those that the music presents.

Quite suddenly the door is opened, and Mr Charteris is announced. With sudden haste, a haste that sends the warm blood to her cheeks, she rises from the piano. Her voice takes the cold, almost aggressive tone it so invariably assumes when she speaks to him.

"I am rather an early visitor, I fear," he says apologetically; "but I am the bearer of a letter from my aunt, and that must be my excuse."

With a stately little bow Yolande receives the missive he hands her. She sees it is addressed to herself, and lays it down quietly.

"Won't you open it?" asks Denzil. "I believe I am to take back your answer. We are going to have a ball at the Priory, and I have come specially to beg the favour of your presence."

"Did you suppose your request would be more powerful than Mrs Ray's invitation?" asks Yolande scornfully, as she takes up the missive with its elaborate crest, and opens it with slow and careless fingers.

"I was not so conceited," he answers, looking keenly, almost sadly, at the beautiful face bent now over the open letter in her hand, a face where the fluctuating colour comes and goes, a face at which he has gazed so often, yet never found less beautiful or less provocative of the admiration it so universally meets.

"You will come?" he asks, as she lays down the letter and looks up at his earnest eyes.

"A ball always has an attraction for me beyond all other forms of enjoyment or—occupation," she remarks; "but I must ask permission before this special one is graced by my presence."

"Just as if you don't always get what you desire!" he says, laughing at her grave tone, the very gravity of which only makes the saucy lips and mirthful eyes more irresistibly attractive.

"That shows how little you know of me," she answers, meeting his quizzical glance

now with a fearlessness that her beating heart and flushing cheeks belie.

“Do I know so little of you?” he says tenderly. “I think—not.”

“It is only at rare moments,” Yolande remarks, rising and ringing the bell as she speaks, “that even our best friends can have a glimpse of our real characters. We but move about masked and cloaked—morally—now-a-days.”

“There is not much concealment about you, at all events,” he says gravely. “It is easy to know when you are vexed or pleased, glad or grieved, sad or gay. I don’t think you could ever be deceitful.”

“Is that a very great virtue?” she asks coolly. “Yes, James, I rang,”—as the door opens and the servant stands within. “Ask papa to come in. Tell him Mr Charteris would be glad to see him.”

“I told you I came to see you!” he says, a little vexed at this abrupt termination to their *tête-à-tête*.

“And I believe you can do so still if you use your eyes,” she rejoins. “Papa is not an extinguisher, I suppose?”

“No; of course I am glad to see him—always; but I wanted to ask you—”

“How I enjoyed the pic-nic? Very much indeed,” she says, as he hesitates, unwilling or unable to frame the question he wishes.

“I don’t doubt that. I suppose the drive home was equally felicitous?”

“If such a word can be applied to the shaky motion of a vehicle, where one’s back is in imminent risk of being broken at any moment, owing to the horse and driver being unable to come to terms, it certainly was,” agrees Yolande.

“Perhaps the driver and some one else found it more easy to come to terms than the steed did,” he says, with a sudden flash of jealous light in his eyes which Yolande is quick to notice.

“Perhaps so,” she says calmly, her glance

turning restlessly to the door, in the hope of seeing her father enter.

“You need not be in such a great hurry to terminate our interview surely,” he remarks, gnawing angrily at the thick moustache which shades his upper lip. “You look so longingly at the door; it is not polite.”

“No?” questions Yolande, raising her pretty brows in assumed surprise. “Had you not better tell Miss Skipton that she has neglected one most important branch in my education—how to entertain gentlemen politely?”

“I scarcely think you need much instruction in that art,” he says angrily. “You seem very well up in it, as a rule.”

“Then this is the exception, I suppose?”

“You certainly take very little trouble to entertain me,” he says; “and yet you are agreeable enough to—to others.”

“Instance and example, please?” she says demurely.

“Oh, there are plenty, but I won’t instance them just now ! I will wait—”

“Till you are one of them ? I do hope your politeness won’t be too severely tried. I am not usually considered disagreeable ; but some people try my temper more than others.”

“So I should suppose,” he says, laughing involuntarily at the quaint impertinence of the girl’s tone. “I need not look very far for instance and example in that case. Ah, here is your father ! ”

“Papa,” says Yolande, leaning lightly over her father’s chair when the usual greetings have been exchanged, “Mr Charteris has come to ask me to a ball.”

“Well, my dear,” answers Mr Mervyn, looking lovingly at the bright face, “of course you said you would be delighted to go—”

“She referred me to you for permission ? ” interrupts Denzil Charteris.

“Which of course was a mere matter of form,” answers the old gentleman, laughing.

"Yolande knows very well that she accepts what she likes and goes where she likes. She is a sad tyrant, Mr Charteris."

"There are some tyrannies—" begins Denzil hastily.

"Exactly," interposes Yolande, with ready mischief. That is such an opening for a compliment, that Mr Charteris would be more than mortal could he withstand the temptation. "I know just what you are going to say, Mr Charteris, so I shall save you the trouble. Now, please entertain papa; for I am going to write my note."

"Can you not write it here?" asks Denzil, with a strange longing for further sight of the beautiful figure that imparts so sweet a charm to the quaint old room.

"No; it is impossible," she says, shaking her head gravely; "I should be sure to do it wrong. I must seek Miss Skipton's advice and assistance."

"He looked vexed," the girl says to herself as she closes the door and goes slowly on to

the schoolroom. "Is he beginning to feel already? Something tells me I shall not have to wait so very long—now."

But the expression on the fair young face is not good to see; and Denzil Charteris would have been strangely perplexed had he caught sight of the girl's look of triumph.

.
The ball-room at the Priory is a splendid room—wide, cool, and lofty. It is brilliant on this night, with the delicate tasteful beauty of flowers and plants, the lustre of lights, and dazzle of women's faces and women's toilets.

The musicians are playing in a hidden gallery; a few early couples are boldly joining in the opening quadrille. Old Mrs Ray, a stately dowager in rich grey satin and point-lace, is receiving her guests, and Denzil Charteris stands beside her, looking handsomer, nobler than ever; so many a romantic damsel thinks as she meets the bow and smile of her host to-night.

"Where is Pauline? She is late," he says to his aunt.

Mrs Ray murmurs some hasty apology; she knows full well that her lovely daughter has no intention of putting in an appearance until the company is assembled, and there are enough admiring eyes to be dazzled and made envious by her presence and her—dress.

"You will keep some waltzes for me, Miss Mervyn?" Denzil whispers eagerly as Yolande enters at last, chaperoned by the orange-clad Miss Skipton, who is indeed fearful and wonderful to behold.

"Certainly," says Yolande graciously.

"Let me enter them down now," he entreats. "If you once go away I shall not have a chance, I know."

With a laugh Yolande hands him her programme.

"Not too many," she says, as she watches the pencil move from place to place.

"Only three," he answers. "I am very self-denying. But then these will be all

I shall have to look forward to. I am marked out for nothing but duty-dances for the rest of the evening."

Yolande makes no answer, unless the sudden sweet glance she gives him is one. Then she moves off, and is speedily surrounded and beset by importunate partners.

It is a very pleasant ball. There are plenty of nice people, a great number of pretty girls, a few lovely ones—first and foremost is Yolande—and a superabundance of men—young, old, handsome, or ugly, as the case may be. Pauline Ray and Yolande Mervyn share the honours of the evening. Both are lovely in their respective styles—the one graceful, haughty, languid, the other daintily beautiful, fresh and sweet, wonderfully fascinating in look and gesture.

It is not till after supper that Denzil Charteris comes to claim the three waltzes he has asked for; and Yolande acknowledges to herself, as they float away over the polished floor, that none of her partners has

in any degree approached him in perfection of dancing.

"You have enjoyed yourself, I hope?" he asks presently, as they pause and stand looking at the other couples gliding, shuffling, or labouring through the mazy dance in their respective styles.

"Very much," she says gaily.

"Are you not tired? You have danced so much."

"Oh, no, not in the least!"

"Whom are you looking at so admiringly?" he asks abruptly.

"Mrs Ray. How exquisitely lovely she looks to-night!" says Yolande enthusiastically.

"Her dress is very pretty," remarks Denzil Charteris.

"Pretty! Oh, Mr Charteris!" cries Yolande in horror. "Why, there is not such a dress in the room! It is absolutely perfection!"

"How much you ladies think of dress!" he says, laughing. "I believe you would

rather be well dressed than good-looking if you had the choice."

"Happily it is possible to combine the two sometimes," Yolande remarks demurely.

"So I see," he answers with a meaning glance. "An instance—"

"Is Mrs Ray," she says quickly.

"True!" he laughs. "But I was not thinking then of—Mrs Ray."

"You are a lazy partner, Mr Charteris. Are you not going to finish this waltz?"

"If you particularly wish it," he answers. "But I have had no time to speak a word to you this evening, and—well, I have had many waltzes."

"We had much better dance than talk," says Yolande readily. "We can't quarrel then."

"And is quarrelling a necessary result of our talking?" he asks gravely.

"Cast your memory back, and then answer that question yourself," laughs Yolande, a little nervously.

"Well, as I don't wish to quarrel to-

night, I must take refuge in dancing," he answers.

And once more his arm is around the slender supple waist, and they sweep off and round the room in perfect unison of step and motion.

"I am sorry that is over," says Denzil Charteris, as the music stops and he gives Yolande his arm. "But I shall live in hope of the next."

"Hope is an inestimable blessing," remarks Yolande coolly. "Are you going to give another ball soon?"

"No. Why do you ask?" he answers, puzzled by her tone and look.

"Simply because you must live on the hope you speak of till then. I am going now."

"Going! And my two waltzes not granted! Miss Mervyn, you are joking!"

"I never joke," she says seriously. "In that respect I differ from the elderly naval man in the *Bab Ballads*. He at least had one."

"You are always trying to elude my mean-

ing," he tells her, with a dangerous softening in his voice. "But to-night I will not be angry with you. I am determined you shall not vex me."

"You are very kind," she says ironically.

"I would say the same of you if only it would induce you to give me the two waltzes."

"Even that inducement," remarks Yolande placidly, "is not sufficient to make me break a resolution."

"You wish to annoy me, I see," he answers, in a tone of visible impatience, "or—to make your favours doubly precious by not cheapening them."

"My favours," laughs the girl mischievously, "are usually sued for as a boon, not demanded as a right, Mr Charteris."

"Would it be of any use for me to sue for the privilege you have refused?"

"I fear not; because—well, it would be no privilege to you—and I have made up my mind to go home now."

"You are, without exception, the most

provoking little lady I have ever met," he says, with a vexed laugh. "But you know how to make yourself of value, I must say."

"I am glad to hear that," the girl answers, her eyes wandering idly from group to group of the hurrying crowd. "It is always best to put a good price on oneself, I have been told."

"I wonder what your price is," he says, his voice softening, his eyes looking into hers with passionate intensity.

"It is too high for any man to pay," she replies, with a forced laugh, but with mounting colour that flushes and fades away on her beautiful face.

"I think not," he says gently. "Perhaps—some day—I will ask it again."

"You may ask," the girl rejoins, wondering why the momentary rapture that fills her heart should change and fade away into a new and passionate sorrow, "but I shall never answer such a question from you, Mr Charteris."

He only smiles, and his hand closes tenderly

on the little fingers that rest so lightly on his arm.

“I will wait,” he whispers softly. “It is a lesson I learnt long ago, and I do not fear failure when I apply it.”

“Faith is a beautiful virtue,” rejoins Yolande, keeping her eyes still averted from the eyes whose searching glance she dares not meet. “I should always practise it were I a man, with but one exception in the objects practised upon.”

“And that is—”

“Woman !”

“Have you such a poor opinion of their deserts ?” he asks gravely. “I have not. Yolande, you kept the promise I asked once, although you would not give it at the time. Why ?”

“I never analysed my motives,” she says coolly. “I suppose I did not speak of my adventure because I did not want a fuss made about it. Certainly it was not from any consideration for you, Mr Charteris.”

"You are pleasantly frank, Miss Mervyn," he returns angrily. "I wonder why I am specially singled out for all your harsh and disdainful speeches?"

"Is there not a couplet about 'many a shaft at random sent'?" queries the girl laughingly. "I am not to blame if you set yourself up for a target, Mr Charteris. Now here we are at the cloak-room. If you will be kind enough to bring Miss Skipton here, I shall be much obliged. I will wait till she comes."

"If you knew how disappointed I am!"—he begins, gazing longingly at the lovely face that looks strangely white and weary now.

"I can imagine it in your absence," she says lightly, "when I picture you making just such speeches and dancing just such dances with—Pauline Ray."

"You think so lightly of me as that?" he questions, with sudden passion. "You believe I am in no way different from the butterfly idlers who whisper the same vapid

compliments in the ears of every girl they meet ? ”

“ I find very little difference in men,” she answers, her eyes fixed on the buttons of her glove, which she is nervously unfastening ; “ and I am sure it would be too much to expect that they should tax their brains afresh to flatter the vanity or further the entertainment of every new partner they seek.”

“ And I am to you only an ordinary partner in a ball-room ? ”

“ What more should you be,” she asks lightly—“ except an unusually good one. I give you your due as a dancer, Mr Charteris.”

“ I wish you would give me my due as something else,” he says earnestly—“ something that your words and smiles have made me, despite all struggles on my own part to resist the fascination you wield. Yolande—”

“ Oh, please go and find Miss Skipton ! ” she cries entreatingly. “ You have no idea how tired I am of—talking.”

He draws back suddenly. The blood

rushes in a fierce hot torrent to his brow, then, receding, leaves him pale as herself. He makes no answer; he only bows low and leaves her there.

In the ball-room he searches among the poor nodding patient wall-flowers until he finds Miss Skipton and gives her Yolande's message. Then at the cloak-room door he leaves her, and with a cold farewell bow to Yolande, he turns and saunters away into the cool grounds, leaving the noise and brilliance of the ball-room behind him.

As he stands under the shadow of the trees, his eyes unheeding the beauty of the night, his heart full of bitter thoughts and anxious doubts, a figure glides towards him all robed in shining costly satin, the face and form and robe bathed in a flood of pure silvery light.

"Pauline!" he says with a start. "Why have you left the ball-room?"

"Perhaps for the same reason as yourself," she says,— "a desire for solitude."


"That is rather an unusual desire on your

part. What will your court yonder do without their queen ? ”

“Denzil,” she says earnestly, “I have not come here for empty compliments. I have had a surfeit of them, as you might know.”

“Can a woman ever have a surfeit of food so desirable ? ”

“Denzil,” she says, with a strange pleading softness in her voice, “do not be cold and harsh to me to-night. Do you remember what night this is—what anniversary it represents ? ”

“Perfectly well—the anniversary of the day Pauline Ray found there were more desirable things  life than love, faith, or honour.”

“Oh, hush ! Don’t be so hard on me now, Denzil. Remember how young I was, how beset on all sides by temptation ; and then—my mother—”

“Your mother ? Oh, yes ! ” he says, with a bitterer sarcasm in his voice than before. “How wise she was for you ! ”

“But, though I wedded my cousin,” she says tremulously, “you know I never loved him, you know that only one man has ever had my heart. Oh, Denzil, on just such a night as this, five summers ago, we stood here betrothed lovers ; and now—”

“Now,” he says, looking at her with a face in which scorn, hate, longing, loathing, seem all mingled in a moment’s passionate remembrance—“now, Pauline, you are nothing to me, nor am I anything to you.”

For a moment she turns very white, as she meets his scornful gaze and hears his bitter words.

He looks at her standing before him, a living picture, all white and gold, like a tall sweet garden-lily, a woman whose sensuous beauty might win any man’s heart, and yet who is to him no more than the grass is to the feet of the treader, than the passing of yesterday is to to-day.

“What I am to you,” she answers, at last lifting her down-bent face and gazing at him

with eyes a world too eloquent, "I cannot help; but what you were to me once you have always been—you are—still."

Despite himself, the anger in his face dies out, the hardness softens. After all, this woman was once dear to him, and he had cared for her very fondly; but his heart was cast aside for her caprice, and he learnt the bitter lesson that has made him distrustful, almost cruel, to women ever since.

"Your words are flattering," he says at last; "but they come too late. Between us lies for ever now the gulf of your perjury. I can never forget that, even if you have found it possible."

"You are so hard upon me," she returns, with a passion of tears in her broken voice and pleading eyes. "Any other man would have forgiven me, because—because I have so sorely repented—because even now I have humbled myself, as few women could have borne to do, only to show you I was anxious to make amends for the past. And on this

night you might surely have some softer feeling towards me ; for, oh, Denzil, the past is only as a dream—I am the same Pauline still!”

“The same Pauline!” he says slowly, almost harshly, as he lays his hands upon her shoulders and gazes with calm searching eyes at the loveliness of face and form that was once so nearly his. “Yes, you have the same eyes—blue and sweet and beguiling—the same soft colouring, the same curves, dimples, smiles, glances, which once drove me mad with longing and with love. Yes, you are the same—fairer, perhaps, than of old ; but it is all nothing to me—now ; so the change must be in me, not in you, Pauline.”

“Then you care for me no more ?” she falters, her lips quivering, her eyes sinking slowly, as though the heavy tears that glisten on their lashes weighed them down.

“I care for you,” he says, with a heavy sigh, releasing her from his clasp, “just so much as a man can care for the woman who once won his love and then—betrayed it.”

The calm, cold speech causes her to shiver as with sudden cold; her clasped hands are wrung together with a passionate gesture of despair.

"I wish I could hate you," she says slowly. "What right have you to stab me with your cruel words—me, who have loved you so well—so well?"

"And I loved you too—once," he answers, with a heavy sigh. "Once? Oh, yes, but long ago, Pauline—long ago! I am a man now, with new hopes, new feelings, new ambitions. I could not count the world well lost for your love now."

"But for—another's?" she says, and then stops and looks with keen scrutiny at his troubled face, noting how her words have altered all its cold serenity.

"There can be no discussion between us," he answers coldly, "about any future act or intention of mine. And now shall we go in?"

"I will remain here," she says, turning

away so that he cannot see the deadly pallor of her face, the wild agony in her eyes.

“As you please,” he returns calmly. “But the night air is chill, and you are but thinly clad.”

“It is my concern,” she says haughtily. “You have no right to interfere with my actions or myself! Leave me!”

He bows and obeys. As his footsteps die away, as the tall figure and its stately height are lost to her watching gaze, she suddenly draws herself up and lifts one white arm towards the glittering sky above her head.

“Let him beware!” she says. “He loves that little coquette—now. Well, her turn shall come. She shall know the humiliation I have known, and drink of the cup that I have drunk of. I will visit his scorn on her head, and live to make him rue the day he gave my place to her. Since I have lost his love I will work out his misery, as surely as Heaven hears me to-night!”

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When Yolande reaches home she finds the household in wild distress. Lights flash to and fro, anxious faces greet her on every side.

“Oh, Yolande,” cries Enid tearfully, “how glad I am that you have come? We have just sent for you. Papa is so ill! Doctor Deane has been with him for the last hour. He has had a fit.”

“Good Heaven!” gasps Yolande.

“Hush! Calm yourself, dear Miss Yolande!” entreats the voice of the kind old doctor. “Your father is better now. The danger is over for the present. Now, be a brave girl, and do your best. A cheerful face and good nursing are all he needs. I leave him in your hands.”





CHAPTER IX.

MR MERVYN is indeed very ill. For long weeks after the eventful ball does Yolande watch and nurse and tend him with a love and devotion that few would have credited her with possessing—few at least who had judged her as Denzil Charteris had—from the frivolous gay exterior she usually showed to the outer world.

It is the middle of June before the old man is pronounced convalescent at last, and, leaning on Yolande's arm, is able to totter feebly round the flower-bordered garden walks of the Court.

One afternoon Yolande leaves him sitting on the lawn in his easy-chair, a pile of newspapers beside him, and the faithful

Skipton hovering within call. She is going for a walk—a walk through the shady lanes and past the ripe gold corn-fields—a walk which she has longed for many days, and is at last able to accomplish. The long confinement to the house, and her many sleepless nights and long watching and anxiety have made the fair brilliant face far thinner and paler than it used to be; but yet that very shadow on its brightness serves only to add a rarer charm and make it infinitely more lovable than of old.

She saunters slowly along, keeping close under the shadows of the boughs. She is bound for a favourite nook of her own—a cool, fragrant, shady place, shut in by oak and beech, with a brook running through it merrily, over clear stones and silvery sands on its way to a far-off river. The very thought of its babble is delicious on this hot June day. And, when Yolande at length reaches it, she gives one long deep sigh of relief, and throws herself down upon the

cool mossy carpet by the side of the water.

It is all so tranquil, and lovely, and still, that a sense of deep restful delight enfolds the girl, who is sole occupant of the retreat. With half-closed eyes she leans against the trunk of a beech-tree, her hands clasped above her head, her whole attitude expressive of thorough indolence and enjoyment.

A full half-hour passes and she neither moves nor stirs. She is busy solving, or trying to solve, a problem in her own mind, and is still only conscious that her efforts are a failure.

All at once she opens her eyes and looks up, to meet the fierce reluctant admiration of another pair, that are taking in every line of the beautiful figure in its indolent grace, every tint of the sweet fair face that now is flushed to crimson as she springs to her feet and confronts the intruder.

"How ever did you come here?" is the not very polite greeting he receives.

“Do you mean have I walked, or ridden, or been transported?” is the answer, as Danzil Charteris advances and proffers his hand. “I lost my way in the woods, and came quite suddenly on this delectable little spot. I thought for a moment that you were the nymph of the stream—you looked so picturesque and so in keeping with your surroundings.”

“I thought you never paid compliments, Mr Charteris,” remarks Yolande, as she gives him her hand in cold greeting.

“No more I do. I hope you don’t consider that a compliment? It was meant for sober earnest.”

“I can hardly believe that,” says Yolande, growing scarlet beneath his earnest scrutiny. “I have not seen you for a long time,” she adds, as he makes no answer to her observation.

“I have been away—travelling in Italy,” he answers curtly.

“Indeed! And how is Mrs Ray?” inquires Yolande, with composure.

"She is quite well," he says, in surprise. "What makes you take an interest in her, may I ask?"

"Oh, she was very kind, and called so often when papa was ill," the girl answers readily. "I—I liked her very much."

"I am glad to hear it," says Denzil Charteris, a little confused. "She is a general favourite. I hope your father is better at last, Miss Mervyn?"

"Thank you—yes. He is stronger, and is able to walk about in the garden. But his illness has altered him terribly."

"You are altered too," he says, looking wistfully at the pallor of cheek and lip, which shows plainly now under the agitation she is trying so bravely to control.

"I—I have not been quite well lately," answers Yolande, flushing hotly again under the fire of his searching eyes.

"And I am keeping you standing," he says, apologetically. "Do, pray, sit down again. I am so sorry to have disturbed you."

“Are you going?” falters Yolande in surprise, as he extends his hand.

“Have I your permission to stay? This little retreat seems to be a secret resort of your own, and I have all unwittingly stumbled upon it.”

“The woods are free to all,” says Yolande. “Don’t hurry away for me, pray.”

“Then will you sit down again and make yourself comfortable, as you were before?”

“Oh, certainly!” she says, with a faint laugh, that is neither so mirthful nor so natural as she could have desired.

For a few moments they are both silent; but the silence is full of uncomfortable thoughts to Yolande, and she is longing to break it.

“I suppose you enjoyed yourself very much when you were away?” she says at last.

“Not so very much,” he answers, with a faint smile. “I fear I am beyond the age for keen enjoyment of anything—even travel and strange lands.”

“You have seen so many?”

“Yes; you are right. I have gone over a good deal of ground in my time.”

“What a cold-blooded way to speak of the delights of travelling!” laughs Yolande. “To me it seems the most enviable thing in the world to be able to go from place to place and country to country. For that reason I often wish I was a man. Women are so helpless. They are obliged to stay at home and stagnate, while you—”

“It is quite possible that your wish may be attained without the drawback a change of sex might prove,” interrupts Denzil.

“How?” questions Yolande, lifting her eyes to his.

“The moment after she would have given anything to recall that question; something in his glance answers it so plainly, and makes her flush with shame from head to foot.

“I should think Mr Stapleton could answer that,” he says quietly.

“I don’t understand you,” returns Yolande haughtily, moved to fierce unreasonable anger by the insinuation his words convey.

“No?” he questions, raising his eyes with pretended surprise. “Shall I put my meaning into plainer words? I thought your conduct on the last occasions that I saw you together left little doubt of the terms on which you stood.”

“You are rather premature in your conclusions then,” retorts Yolande, with visible annoyance. “I—I can’t help Lance making himself ridiculous—he always does.”

“Ridiculous!” echoes Denzil bitterly. “Well, I suppose there is something ridiculous in a man’s utter subjugation to a woman’s charms. The fact of security lessens your sex’s appreciation directly. But I thought—I understood that you and Mr Stapleton were engaged.”

“Not to my knowledge certainly,” says Yolande, an angry spot glowing in her cheeks at this confused explanation.

"He is very fond of you," persists Mr Charteris; "and you have given him plenty of encouragement."

"I don't know what right you have to interfere with or question my actions," says Yolande, angrily.

"True," he answers calmly; "I have no right, as you say. I even remember how once you said it would be impossible for us to be—friends."

"It was you who said that!" exclaims Yolande.

"But you who forced me to come to the conclusion."

"Are you going to favour me with another lecture?" she asks, half perplexed, half angry at the turn the conversation is taking.

"No;" and he looks full at the pouting, defiant face—looks with eyes that hold her own and force them to answer the question in his gaze—a question that makes her heart throb wildly and painfully, and brings the

tell-tale colour to cheek and brow in a swift and lovely tide.

“You think me very intrusive and disagreeable, do you not?” he says softly.

“I don’t know what you are like to—to other people,” stammers Yolande; “but I am quite sure you have never tried to make yourself agreeable to me!”

“Perhaps I had a reason,” he says, still in that soft low voice that thrills to her heart like some sweet strain of music. “Perhaps I thought that making myself agreeable to you might have consequences the very reverse to—me!”

Yolande is silent. Her colour comes and goes. Her heart beats so fast and loud that she thinks he must almost hear it.

“You know,” he goes on presently, not looking at her now, but away through the green woodland vista stretching into dim shadow far beyond—“you know that there are some people one must either cling to or

avoid—either love or hate I saw you first at that ball at Colston—you remember, I suppose? You were the admired of all beholders. You lavished smiles and glances on scores of devoted swains. You—to use a familiar phrase—‘turned the heads’ of half the men in the room! The women of course called you an unscrupulous flirt. I was introduced. I thought to myself, ‘I will see if she is the same to me as to all others.’ You were—just the same. It pained me to discover it. I did not care for smiles that were cheapened by being free to all—for looks and words that were showered on every fool who flattered your vanity and paid you vapid compliments. ‘Still,’ I said to myself, ‘she is very young; it is her first ball. I will not judge her to-night.’ We met again—many times. The last—shall I speak of that? No, not now—not now! It can be no pleasant memory for either of us—it has been a very painful one to me!”

“Mr Charteris,” interrupts Yolande, tremb-

ling with passionate indignation at these rebukes, "how dare you—"

"Hush—hear me out!" he says sternly ; and something on his face forces back the angry words on the girl's proud parted lips. "After to-day you shall never say I have lectured or found fault with you. I know you are indignant that I dare to question your conduct—that I alone see faults where others extol virtues. But, oh child, if you only knew ! Can you not see it is because I would have you so perfect that I lament the imperfections that mar your dangerous fascination ? Men often go mad for a woman's loveliness. I think I have ; but, in spite of the madness, there is something in you better worth winning than even your peerless beauty—and it is that which I have tried so hard to discover. No mere empty beauty could satisfy me ; I have set my ideal higher. But I think that with me you are oftener playing a part than showing your real self. And, present or absent, I cannot forget you. Yet— Oh, Yolande,

you have made me suffer cruelly often and often !”

She turns and looks at him, the colour all gone out of her face—a great wonder and a fierce joy lighting it with triumph.

“ I ? ” she says.

“ Yes, you ! You could not guess—how should I suppose it possible, when only absence and silence taught me the painful truth at last. Only after long struggles and weary days did love conquer pride, and bring me back to you again ; for, Yolande, I love you ! ”

The words are spoken at last—the words for which she has craved and longed so often, and at last despaired of ever winning. Even now she scarcely believes her ears. She fears this is but some dream that mocks her sleeping senses.

Stupefied and bewildered she gazes at him as he kneels at her feet and draws both her hands within his own and looks with longing, questioning eyes into the face which has

haunted every hour of his existence since first he saw its loveliness.

Now it is white as the lilies floating upon the stream's quiet breast; the hands in his eager clasp are cold as ice. Suddenly she springs to her feet and confronts him, with all the softness and beauty gone from her flashing eyes.

"As you have judged me," she says, "so I am! You believe I care only for triumphs, for conquests? You are right. I am sorry, Mr Charteris, that you should at last have formed an opinion so opposite to that with which you first favoured me; for I believe I have to thank you alone for teaching me to play the part of 'My Lady Coquette'!"

He rises and confronts her, pale even through the sun-bronzed darkness of his face; in his eyes a great wonder and a great dread have gathered.

"What do you mean?" he asks hoarsely.

"Mean?"—and Yolande's scornful laugh rings through the stillness, clear and cruel

as death. "I scarcely thought you would play the hypocrite, Mr Charteris. Have you forgotten the insult of the fourteenth of February? If so, I have not. I vowed then to bring you to my feet sooner or later, and give back to you the humiliation you dealt me. Of late I did not think it possible I should ever do so, for you have treated me with scant courtesy; and, to your credit, I must confess I never dreamed you would declare yourself a lover of mine. Doubtless you think you have done me a great honour—and I suppose you have; but it is one I cannot appreciate. I was but a thoughtless child when you first saw me. My faults were only the faults of youth and lightheartedness. When you let me see your opinion of these and of myself on that—that morning, I grew hardened. I almost hated you then. No one had ever said such things to me before. Oh, why do I speak of it?" she goes on passionately, as she looks at the stern, cold face before her.

“No one ever dared find fault with me before, not even those who had the right. And I am not a flirt, whatever you may please to think! If people like me and care for my society, that is their look-out. I have never tried to catch any one yet. How can I help it if they make fools of themselves?”

“As I have done,” he interposes quietly. “One half of what you have said, Miss Mervyn, I do not understand; the other half is the unreasonable utterance of an angry child. In any case I ought to thank you for opening my eyes to your real opinion of me. I feel flattered to think your vow — whatever it was — has been at last accomplished through my instrumentality. I suppose there is nothing more to be said between us now?”

“Nothing,” says Yolande, feeling so miserably small and crushed beneath those cold icy words that she has hard work to keep the tears back from her eyes.

He looks at her standing there, the gold of the sunlight on the richer gold of her hair, the quivering lips pale, the lovely face lovely still, even in the pride and anger that mar its soft childlike beauty. Involuntarily his own softens, his voice grows less hard and firm.

“Nothing,” he repeats slowly. “No ; it is all over and done with. I suppose I shall forget in time the bitter pain you have given me to-day. I have never loved any woman, I have never wanted any woman, as I have loved and wanted you. I may have seemed harsh and cold often, and so you misjudged me. And this is my punishment. Well, I will not complain. You will be happy some day. For me it does not matter. I have always been an unfortunate man. Fate has been very bitter against me.”

He sighs and looks again at the troubled, downcast face of the girl who has wronged him so cruelly, misjudged him so basely.

“Perhaps it is as well,” he goes on, in a strange dreamy voice, as of one who talks in his sleep. “We should never have been happy, even—even if you had loved me. I do not think you could be constant, even if you tried.”

“Your opinions of me are always flattering,” says Yolande, scornfully.

He smiles faintly.

“You have been fed on sugar so long that all honest food is distasteful,” he remarks. “I wish I could feel more angry with you than I do ; for Heaven knows your little hand has stabbed me deep enough to-day ! How deep you will never know, unless you too learn what it is to lay your whole life down at the foot of one being in the world, and see the folly and uselessness of such an action.”

Yolande shivers, as if the breath of winter were upon her instead of the warm luxuriance of summer. Does she not feel even now in her heart’s depths the truth of

his words? Does she not know that even at this very moment their truth is being painfully realised in the bitter agony that fills her proud and wilful heart?

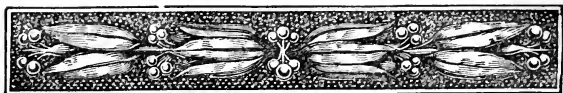
"There is one question I should like to ask you," he continues. "What did you mean by the fourteenth of February? I am not aware that I even saw you on that day."

"There is little use to explain now," Yolande says icily, pressing her cold locked fingers tightly together, as if to nerve her for the struggle still before her. "I only wonder that, having through all our intercourse treated me as a heartless coquette, you should suddenly seem to expect I am anything else. You told me my character plainly enough once. You have only yourself to blame if I verify it."

"You are right," he answers calmly. "I have but added one more name to your list of triumphs. I should have remembered how incapable you must be of appreciating a true man's true love."

Then he moves away, with no other word, or look at the motionless figure and lovely face that in all his days, be they long or short, he knows he can never forget.





CHAPTER X.



YOLANDE stands where Denzil Charteris has left her, listening to the last echo of his footsteps as they die away in the distance. A curious faint smile comes over her face—a smile that has no mirth, and looks strangely out of place on those sweet red lips.

“So I have won my triumph and kept my vow after all!” she says, in a slow, harsh voice, all unlike her own. “But I seem to understand now what people mean by Dead-Sea fruit.”

A shamed streak of red tinges her pale cheeks. Her eyes wander aimlessly over the green moss, the bubbling water, the sun-cast shadows. A strange dull pain fills

her heart and racks her with an agony she has never before known.

“What have I done—oh, what have I done?” she moans, and straightway throws herself down upon the cool soft grass and buries her face in her hands.

She does not weep now; only long shivering sighs shake her from head to foot. She knows that to the latest moment of her life she will never be able to recall the joy she has thrown away, the love she has scorned, the peace she has lost.

“I am only seventeen,” she says wearily, “and all my life seems ended to-day. No other man can ever be to me what he has been. And I must live and smile and pretend, and all the time I shall think of him; every hour I shall know I have spoilt my own future and his. Oh, why did I do it—why?”

Only her own heart can give the answer to that question, the heart to whose promptings she has given the lie for the sake of a foolish vengeance, a passionate vow.

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The evening shadows are falling softly across the woodland as Yolande at last takes her way home. The leaves rustle overhead, the birds' songs are silent. Through the interstices of the closely-woven boughs the sky looks darkly down, overshadowed by heavy clouds, the portents of a storm. A low heavy roll of distant thunder comes pealing across the stillness. Yolande starts and shivers as she hears it, and hurries on with quicker steps.

The darkness grows deeper, the thunder peals out more distinctly. In her haste she strikes into a side-path, thinking it a shorter way to the main road beyond. The path gets narrower and narrower; frightened, she pauses and looks around. She has no knowledge of this place; never before has she seen it. A belt of trees hem in a dark pool, all set with noxious weeds and thick with slime, and full of loathsome, sluggish creeping things that

crawl and wriggle about the noisome depths.

Yolande turns pale with terror. A tongue of lightning suddenly leaps from the black heavy clouds and plays in ghastly brilliance over the dark water at her feet. Involuntarily she starts back. At the same moment the boughs part on the opposite side of the pool, and a face looks at her through the screen of leaves—the same awful face, with wild eyes and unkempt locks that once before met her terrified gaze in the turret of the ruined castle. For a moment she stands spell-bound—paralysed. Then, with a wild fearful shriek that echoes over the silent woods and is drowned by the crashing thunder, she turns and flies in maddening terror along the path she has just trodden.

How long she has run, how much ground she has traversed, she does not know. Terror lends wings to her steps—a terror greater even than that which the peals of thunder or the flashes of lightning carry in their train. Gasp-

ing, trembling, quivering like a hunted deer, she flies on and on, taking no heed of where she goes, blind with fear of the awful thing that she fancies is on her track, never daring to look behind for dread of its pursuit.

Flying in headlong speed she comes full tilt against the figure of a man advancing to meet her. Recoiling, she cries aloud. Her nerves are all unstrung, her face is white, her eyes are wild.

“Yolande!—good Heaven! Yolande, what is it?” exclaims a familiar voice.

The girl looks up; her lips quiver, her cheeks flush.

“Oh, Lance, dear Lance,” she cries, as she clings like a frightened child to his strong young arm, “save me, for Heaven’s sake! It is coming—I know it is!”

“What is coming?” he exclaims in bewilderment, looking from the girl’s terrified face to the path up which she points.

“That thing—that face!” she cries, hiding her eyes on his shoulder, and shuddering

from head to foot. "Oh, Lance, I have been so terrified!"

"Poor child, poor Yolande!" he says pityingly, "My dear, come with me; there is nothing to frighten you now."

He places his arm round her and half-carries, half-leads her away, marvelling in his own mind what can have occurred to alarm her so much.

"I came to look for you," he says gently at last. "They were all so alarmed at the Court about your long absence especially when the storm threatened. Dear, how you tremble! Lean more on me. We are not very far from home now."

He is too sensible to ask any questions; in her overwrought hysterical state he sees it would be dangerous. With quiet soothing words he leads her on until they are out of the wood and close to the lodge.

The rain begins to fall now, and there is still a long distance to traverse before they can reach the house.

"I tell you what we must do," says Lance gently—"wait here at the lodge till the storm is over. You will be drenched to the skin in that light dress if you attempt to go any farther. I will send a message up to the house to say you are safe."

Yolande acquiesces silently. She is too spent and exhausted to speak, and it is pleasant to have some one who will take all trouble of her hands. They go into the pretty tidy little house, and Lance begs the woman to make some tea for the wearied girl, while he pencils a hasty missive which one of her boys bear to the Court.

This done, he comes back to Yolande once more, and bends tenderly over her as she leans back in her chair.

"For all the world just like a lover," thinks cheery Mrs Halling, as she busies herself over the preparation of tea.

"You are better now, are you not?" he says gently.

"Oh, yes!" answers Yolande, keeping her

eyes closed, and thoroughly enjoying the rest and quiet of the pretty flower-scented parlour. "Lance, how glad I am I met you!"

"I am glad too," he says quietly. "No; don't try to tell me about it yet. Wait till you have had your tea."

"I know you think me very foolish," she remarks, with a strange wistfulness in the pretty trembling voice; "but I really saw something, and I got so frightened. I don't know where I should have run to if you had not met me."

"You ought not to go for long, solitary rambles in the woods," declares Lance, almost sternly. "It is not safe. I shall tell your father."

"No; please don't," she says pleadingly, unclosing her eyes and looking up into his face. "He would be so distressed. Promise me, Lance, that you won't say anything about this to—to anybody."

"But, Yolande," begins Lance, sorely

puzzled by such an unexpected desire, "you forget—"

"No," she says hurriedly; "I don't forget. I—well, perhaps I was nervous, and—and fancied I saw it. The storm frightened me so."

"No mere fancy could have thrown you into such a state of nervous terror as that in which I found you," rejoins Lance sternly. "Why do you wish to conceal what has happened?"

"Ah, why?" the girl asks herself wearily. Only from some dim foolish sense of loyalty to the man she has wronged, remembering how once before he had prayed her to be silent respecting the mystery of the ruined turret.

"There is nothing to conceal," she says, looking up at Lance with brave unshrinking eyes. "But to please me, Lance, don't say anything about this until—I—give you leave."

"To please you," he returns softly, "you know I would do anything."

“Then do this,” she entreats eagerly—
“promise me.”

He looks at her once more, puzzled by this persistence, puzzled still more by the fear and anxiety on her white face and in her wide sorrowful eyes.

“Very well,” he says ; “I promise.”

And, in a sudden abandonment of gratitude and relief, Yolande seizes his hand and presses it to her lips.

He flushes and trembles like a girl.

“Such thanks would repay any service, my sweet,” he says passionately.

“Ahem ! I have brought the tea, miss,” interrupts the voice of Mrs Halling apologetically.

Yolande drinks the tea in a leisurely fashion, growing quieter and graver as the time goes on ; and Lance waits on her and hovers about her in a way that makes the lodge-keeper smile, so plainly does it bespeak the state of affairs on one side at least.

"Does it still rain?" the girl asks at length, as she places the empty cup upon the table.

"Yes; but I don't think it will last much longer," answers Lance, going over to the window and looking out at the rapidly-clearing sky.

"I hope papa has not been frightened about me," continues Yolande, as she leaves her chair and also walks over to where Lance stands—walks with slow and languid steps, he notices with sudden pain.

"How tired you must be, dear!" he says involuntarily. "Oh, Yolande, I wish I had been with you this afternoon! I am sure something has upset you; your face is so white, and you look quite different from what you usually do!"

"Yes; if you had been with me," confesses Yolande, in quick pained accents, "it would have been all different now."

"What do you mean?" he says quickly.

"I think I hardly know myself," answers

the girl, as she moves restlessly away from his side. "I suppose there are times in every one's experience when even a little thing may turn the scale of fate, when half-an-hour in a day may affect a whole future, when the swerving aside from a path, or the choice of one particular road, may alter life entirely. Heaven, what a mockery of human wisdom is the little commonplace thing men call chance !"

"What odd things you have said to-day, Yolande," says Lance, looking more and more puzzled by her strange ways. "Dear, I wish you would trust me, and tell me what happened in the woods. You know surely by this time, Yolande, how staunch a friend I am to you and yours."

"Hush !"—and the girl turns suddenly towards him, her face blanched to the very lips. "Lance, what was that ? Did you not hear something—a cry ?"

"Nonsense, dear ; it is only your fancy," he says soothingly, as he comes to her side

once more. "Why, how you tremble! What frightens you now?"

"I thought I—heard— But no; it could not be! Don't look so alarmed, Lance," she continues, trying to speak lightly. "I am full of fancies to-night. I suppose the thunder is the cause. A storm always unsettles me."

But Lance wonders how any fear could so unnerve her as to give such a frightened, hunted look to her eyes, and make her start and quiver like a leaf at every sound and step.

"Something has happened," he says again to himself, noting every change in the pale young face, every tremor in the slight figure—"something. By Heaven, it shall go hard with me if I don't find out what, before another twelve hours are over my head!"

The rain still falls in soft plashing drops; now and then a faint and far-off echo of the passing thunder rolls through the cool sweet air. But the lurid gleam of the storm is

all gone, and the earth smiles, refreshed and gladdened for its rough and rude caresses.

Yolande stands by the open window, her face still bearing the deadly pallor, her eyes still dark and troubled with the un-forgotten dread. Somehow, in all the years Lance has known her, he has never seen her look as she does to-night. He marvels at it more and more. This is not the bright changeful Yolande who has laughed at and coquetted with and teased him so often ; it is a sorrowful, wan-faced girl, over whom the shadow of some heavy trouble seems to have fallen.

As he stands watching her in pained perplexity, she turns suddenly and meets his eyes. The tender look, the yearning pity move her as no words could have done. A mist of tears springs suddenly to her eyes ; her lips quiver like the lips of a grieving child.

“Don’t Lance,” she cries ; “I—I cannot

bear it!" And straightway she leans her head upon her clasped fingers and sobs as if her heart would break.

"Yolande," he says—and his voice trembles pitifully—"what is it, dear? Can't I help you?"

"No," she answers wildly, as she shrinks away from his touch—"no one can help me! Oh, Lance, don't waste your brave, strong heart on me! You little know what a vile, guilty wretch I feel to-night!"

The wild words scarcely bear any real meaning to his heart; he looks upon them as the fevered utterance of an overwrought brain. He little thinks that ere the twelve hours he has spoken of are over they will recur to him again and again, sharp and stinging as serpents' fangs, full of a dread too horrible for any lips to utter.

When the wild burst of weeping is over, he brings her hat and tells her gently that it is better to go home now. Yolande says nothing. She takes the hat from his hand

and, with cold shaking fingers, fastens the elastic ; and then, with a few words of thanks to the lodge-keeper, they leave together.

Not one sentence of all the many her lips frame does Yolande utter during the quiet homeward walk. She feels dimly that some great change has come to her, that never again can she laugh and talk and behave herself in the free, lighthearted, foolish fashion she has hitherto done.

Is it only a few hours, she wonders, since she left home and wandered off in happy idleness for that saunter through the woods—only a few hours since she held her life's happiness in her hands and threw it carelessly, thanklessly away, as a child throws away a toy he is wearied of—only a few hours, since without word of pity or forgiveness, she said farewell to the face whose very look haunts her still, said it when it had passed from her sight, said it amidst bitter weeping and undying remorse ? It seems as if weeks, months, had intervened since then—as if

their passage was marked on her own face as well as in her aching heart, marked so that all eyes might read it and smile at her folly.

Alas, alas for the regrets that come too late, for the remorse that can never bring atonement in its train! Like the trail of the serpent it lies on every bright and joyous gift of life, breathing its poison over human souls and turning rejoicing into grief and love into bitterness!





CHAPTER XI.

“**A**ND you were out in the woods in all that storm, Yolande? Oh, how frightened you must have been!”

It is Enid who says this—Enid, who, sitting by Yolande’s bedside, has not yet done wondering over her bright sister’s sudden indisposition and hasty retirement to her own room. Still more bewildered is she when, coming in with some wine a little later, she finds Yolande in bed, her face white as the pillows on which she is lying back with such utter weariness, her eyes circled by dark rims of pain.

“What made you stay out so long?” persists Enid. “I am sure any one could

have seen the storm coming on a full hour before it burst."

"Oh, Enid," Yolande says wearily, "have I not told you enough? If you only knew how my head aches, you would be quiet."

"I'm sure I don't want to make it worse!" cries Enid, jumping up with an alacrity that sets every nerve quivering in Yolande's excited frame. "But it must be a very bad headache if you won't talk yourself, and can't bear to be spoken to either."

"Don't be cross, dear," pleads her sister, with a gentleness altogether rare in her soft voice. "I know I am bad company to-night; but I really cannot help it."

"Papa was dreadfully anxious about you this afternoon," remarks Enid, as she crosses over to the toilet-table and begins fingering the pretty knick-knacks scattered there; "and then Lance Stapleton called and went off to look for you. What do

you think Skippy told papa afterwards, Yolande ? ”

“ I’m sure I don’t know,” says the girl wearily, longing—oh, so intensely !—for solitude and peace, yet not liking to bid her bright young sister leave her.

“ She said Lance was so much attached to you that it was quite certain he would propose, and what a good thing it would be for you to marry him, as the properties were so near, and he was so well off. You should have seen how astonished papa looked. I believe he thinks we are not half grown up yet, and the bare idea of lovers and suitors is a terrible bugbear.”

“ He need not fear I shall leave him for any lover or suitor in the world,” answers Yolande calmly, yet with a certain pain in the clear tones that would have betrayed itself to ears keener and more loving than those of a sister.

“ Why ? I’m sure you’re not in earnest,” returns Enid quickly. “ The idea of your

being long at home—it's too absurd! You're like the Widow Malone, you know, Yolande, that papa used to sing about,—

‘Of lovers she had a full score or more,
And all of them fortunes galore in store.’”

“But even the Widow Malone was a long time making up her mind,” says Yolande, with a faint little smile breaking the sad curves of her pretty mouth and lighting its unusual gravity.

“Yes; and when she did give in, it was to a very rough wooer, was it not? I'm sure I should be very sorry for any man to take consent for granted in the cool fashion of ‘Mr O'Brian from Clare!’” and Enid laughs merrily.

“But then you are not a widow; that makes all the difference. Doesn't the moral of the song point out that fact very plainly?”

“Yes; that's true,” says Enid, removing the stopper from a glass scent-bottle and sniffing gratefully at its fragrant contents.

“Yolande,” she adds abruptly, “Mr Charteris has come back.”

“How did you know?” asks Yolande, thankful that the engrossing nature of scents and essences still keeps her sister’s back turned towards her.

“Mrs Deane was calling and told us,” returns Enid, replacing the bottles at last, and sauntering slowly over to the broad bay-window. “I wonder if he will stay long this time? The way that man does fly about is most extraordinary. He sets a very bad example to the county generally. Mrs Deane says he ought to marry his cousin, Mrs Ray. She is awfully in love with him!”

Yolande is silent. Her heart is throbbing painfully. The hot blood rushes wildly through her veins, and changes all the pallor of her face to warmth and brilliance. Enid does not look at her fortunately; she is busy speculating on the chances of the match she has mentioned.

"I'm sure it would be a very good thing for them both," she goes on presently ; "and it would be nice to have a mistress at the Priory. A place like that ought to be presided over by a lady. What jolly balls they would give !"

"Is—is Mrs Ray at the Priory now, did Mrs Deane say ?" asks Yolande presently.

"Yes ; she and her mother are still there. I think Mr Charteris is an odd sort of man. I can't say I like him. I hate those stern, severe-looking men who always seem to be rebuking more easily-contented people for enjoying life and taking it easily. If I had the choice, I should infinitely prefer Lance Stapleton ; wouldn't you ?"

A bitter laugh is all Yolande's answer. The idea of contrasting good-humoured boyish Lance with Denzil Charteris seems too absurd even for consideration.

"But of course you would," chatters Enid placidly. "You hate grave, stern people even more than I do. Yolande, I don't

wish you to marry just yet a while ; but, when you do, mind and pick out a nice jolly fellow for a brother-in-law—some one up to lots of fun, and who'll invite us to your place—for of course he'll have a place, Yolande—and let us do just what we like. If he had a brother or two," she goes on musingly, "it wouldn't be bad. It would do to amuse me and Vi. But no sisters—mind that! A husband's sisters are a nuisance, only a degree less than his mother."

"How you do rattle on, dear!" says Yolande, with faint rebuke. "No one would think you were fifteen, to hear you talk."

"I am nearly sixteen now," declares Enid, with dignity ; "and many girls are married at sixteen."

"Married, married—how you do harp on that string!" exclaims Yolande pettishly. "I should recommend you to read the last joke in *Punch*."

"What was that?" asks Enid curiously.

"A little boy asks his mother if men

want to get married as much as women do. 'Why do you ask?' she says. 'Because, ma, the ladies who call on you are always talking about getting married; but the men don't!'

"What a horrid child!" laughs Enid. "I wonder if children ever do say those smart things that are written about them, or if they are only invented?"

"Oh, I daresay they say them!" answers Yolande, turning wearily on her pillows. "The *enfant terrible* is no myth, I assure you."

"Are you going to sleep?" asks Enid, turning away from the window and noticing her sister's change of position.

"Yes, if I can."

"Well, I won't stand here chattering any longer," returns Enid graciously. "Can I do anything more for you?"

"No, thank you," answers Yolande, in faint accents. "I only want quiet and rest."

"Well, good night then," says the younger

girl, bending over the golden head and pressing her lips to Yolande's hot brow. "Sleep well, and wake up bright and merry to-morrow."

"To-morrow!" thinks Yolande, as the door closes and the solitude she has longed for is hers at last. "Oh, what will any to-morrow be to me now?"

And the cool slow hours of the night pass on, and the faint pale daybreak lights the sky before that question is answered, or the aching brain and heart find respite from the misery of thought in the blessed oblivion of sleep.

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The morning sun is flooding all the dainty pink-and-white chamber when Yolande awakes.

At first the pretty eyes look wistfully round, then the languid lids close over them once more.

"What has happened since yesterday?" she asks herself. "Why does my heart feel so heavy, my spirit so sad?"

Soon enough the answer comes. The waves of sorrow roll back in freshly-weighted numbers, breaking over memory, and dashing fiercely and swiftly against the self-erected barriers of pride.

She springs up and goes over to the window. A dim reflection in her toilet-glass catches her eye as she passes—the image of a slim white figure, with a face from which all the blood has fled, and where a sudden pallid shadow has fallen. She starts in fear.

“Oh, how ill I look!” she says wildly. “What will they think?”

Without another glance at the face that looks so strange and unfamiliar now, she draws up the blind and proceeds hurriedly with her toilet. The fresh cool air comes in through the window she has opened; and that and the cold water, which she dashes over her face and shoulders, seem to revive her a little.

“I must try to be like my old self,” she says, as with trembling fingers she fastens

her cambric morning-dress and knots the pale-blue ribbon round her snowy slender throat. "No one must see, no one must know. It is my secret ; and I shall keep it as long as I live."

As she turns away, and is about to leave the room, a sound strikes upon her ear that seems to transfix her with horror. It is the great bell of Beechhampton ringing loud and clear in the golden sunny beauty of the early day.

Floating over the dark green woods, echoing over the quiet fields, the grassy meadows, comes that strange mournful warning sound. Yolande hears it, and shivers from head to foot. Never does that bell ring except for death or disaster to some member of the Charteris household. Only once before in her memory has that sound been heard, and then death and woe lay heavy on their home. Whiter than the folds of her gown, Yolande stands and listens, a wild look of horror in her fixed eyes, a sobbing sigh bursting from her pale quivering lips.

“Is it for him?” she gasps, and staggers to a chair and kneels down in agony unutterable, burying her face in her hands as if to shut out the mournful note, which ever and anon floats in through the open window like an omen of ill.

In a moment the door is thrown open. Enid and Vi rush in wildly.

“Yolande, Yolande, do you hear the bell? Something must have happened at the Priory! Yolande—”

“Hush!” says Vi softly. “Don’t you see, Enid, she is saying her prayers?”

“They stand quite still, hand locked in hand, gazing at the kneeling figure so silent and so still now. The stillness awes them. They look at each other in pale wonder.

“Is she ill?” whispers one softly.

Then Enid approaches and lays her hand upon the shoulder of the kneeling girl. She never moves. Frightened and bewildered, she beckons to Vi, and they draw away the hands from Yolande’s face.

It is white and cold as death.

“She has fainted!” cries Enid in terror. And they lay her down with gentle hands and dash water over her face; and Vi runs off in haste for assistance.





CHAPTER XII.



YOLANDE'S trance of insensibility lasts so long that the whole household are filled with fear and anxiety. Never before in the remembrance of any one has she been known to faint. When she at last recovers, they lay her back gently on her pretty white bed ; and Enid promises to bring up her breakfast, if she will only lie still and rest and not attempt to come down stairs again. This Yolande promises gladly enough. She feels thoroughly ill and worn out. Her nerves are unstrung. Her head throbs as if a hammer were beating within her aching brain. A great dread has seized her heart. She cares for nothing now but to be left in peace, bearing her

misery as best she can, fearing to have her fears realised.

For she never doubts but that ill of some sort has chanced to Denzil Charteris. She pictures him again and again as lying dead and cold in his stately home—the last of his race, the one man in all the world of men around her for whom she could ever feel love and longing and remorse.

Ere the day is many hours older, news comes from Beechhampton Priory. Denzil Charteris is missing. He had gone out after luncheon on the previous day, and no one has seen or heard of him since. There had been a dinner-party at the Priory in the evening, and the guests had waited for a full hour in expectation of the arrival of the master of the house. He had not come. The whole night long had he been waited for, and sought, yet still no tidings had reached any one.

His aunt and cousin are frantic with fear. Messages are sent in every direction to the

houses of all his friends and acquaintances, in the faint though unlikely hope that he may have forgotten the dinner-party, and stayed at some house for the night.

The answer is always the same. No one has seen him or heard anything of him since noon of the day on which he so unaccountably disappeared.

All this Yolande hears at intervals—hears with a white set face, the agony of which makes every one wonder—hears with the dull throbs of her heart, making her sick with an intolerable anguish as she lies still and holds her peace.

For no word does she speak of the meeting in the woods—it could do no good, she tells herself wearily. It could not give any clue to his fate, and she could not face the questions and remarks that would be showered upon her in consequence.

So through the long miserable hours of that most miserable day she lies in her darkened chamber, too worn and wretched for

speech ; and without, in the silent woods and leafy glades, the searchers search for track or trace of the missing man, and ever and anon at stated times they meet with still the same hopeless tale on every lip—"No tidings yet."

The sunlight dies in the west, and still far and near the news is spreading, and excitement and wonder wax deeper and more painful. All through the dusk, as through the day, the woods echo to the sound of hurrying feet, and the startled birds flutter into denser shade. There come a pause and stillness with the approach of night, and the stars shine over anxious faces still turned to one another for suggestion or for hope, until sadly they separate and go their way at last, saying, "To-morrow may bring tidings."

Alas, the next day and the next pass, and still with no result ; and the only tongue that could have given some faint clue to the disheartened seekers is now locked in insen-

sibility by the delirium and exhaustion of fever.

Yolande is very ill. Of time she has no knowledge, of days she has no count. The hours sweep by, and the shadows of anxiety deepen with each, and her young sisters' voices lose their gay ring, and her father's face is lined with heavier care; and her young lover comes and departs like a restless spirit, with all the light and gladness gone out of his sad eyes and once cheery face.

But at length she grows better. One night, when the heat and stillness of the summer air still brood over the outer world, when a cool faint breeze rustles the roses at her window with a soft rush of melancholy music, when solitude and silence, starlighted and full of peace and rest as only a summer night can be, brood over earth and sky, she opens her eyes and sees it all, and smiles.

A great weakness is upon her still; but

the fire and torture of fever have passed from her throbbing brain, and lightened some of its heavy burden. The sights and sounds around grow familiar to her once more, strength comes slowly back, but with it are memory and pain.

For she remembers all—the lover she has rejected, the anguish she has borne, the horror of that hour when she heard his doom in the clanging sound of the warning bell. And then, at last, when courage comes to her to ask the question that ever trembles on her lips, she learns that the mystery of his disappearance is still unsolved, that of his fate no certain news has reached the ears of any one since that fatal summer day.

Then a doubt creeps into her heart and blanches her cheeks to yet deeper pallor.

“Should I have told?” she thinks. “Was I wrong in concealing it so long?”

She wonders if she has courage and strength to tell it still, knowing how the

memories that torture, the regrets that madden her, must be bared to stern eyes and spoken to strangers' ears.

"Oh, I cannot—I cannot!" she sobs, and buries her face in the cushions of her couch, weeping as only women weep in the abandonment of a great woe.

"Yolande," says a kindly voice beside her—"dear Yolande, what is it?"

The girl raises her tear-stained face, and sees Lance Stapleton's sympathetic countenance bending over her.

"Lance," she says, in faint surprise, and gives him her little thin hand in greeting.

It looks so white and tiny in his great brown palm, so like a fragile snowdrop, he thinks, that for the life of him he can give her no greeting—he only stands beside her, holding her wee white fingers, and looking with sorrowful and most loving eyes at the changed and saddened beauty of her face.

"It is good of you to come so soon,"

she says, gently. "And I am all alone just now. Vi and Enid are out."

"I know," he returns, quietly. "Are you getting better? Do you feel stronger?"

He seats himself by her side.

"Oh, yes!" she answers, languidly. "I suppose you see a great change in me, Lance?"

He looks at her. A great ball seems to rise in his throat, his eyes grow dim. No words will come through his white lips, strive how he may to form them.

"Every one tells me how altered I am," she goes on presently, turning her eyes from his sad face to the glowing splendour of the summer's ripe luxuriance, as it rests on wood and flower and leaf of the beautiful grounds without. "Even Arty does not tease me now. I must be altered if he can find no heart to chaff and torment me, mustn't I?"

"After such an illness as yours," he says, with slow and painful effort, "of course you

must be changed. It is only to be expected. But you will be all right again by-and-by, when you get away to the sea—which, of course, you will do.”

“The sea?” interrogates Yolande, languidly. “Yes, I should like that, I think. Do you know, Lance,” she goes on, passionately, “there are days when I positively hate this place; when the sight of the woods yonder, and the songs of the birds by the window-panes, and all the old familiar scents and sounds about us sicken me? And always I hear that bell; just as it rang on that morning, just as it rang all through those weary weeks when I was ill, so now it rings, still.”

“You are over-excited, dear,” he says, soothingly. “Naturally it was a great shock to you, as to us all; but, for my own part, I still think he will turn up. I am sure he is not dead. There would have been some trace found before this—if—if that had been the case.”

She lifts her head. A bright crimson spot glows in either cheek. She puts one little hand on his. He starts at the touch, for it burns like a coal of fire, and but a few moments ago it was so cold.

“Lance,” she says, excitedly, “I must tell you now. I have never told any one before. I saw him—on—that—afternoon.”

Slowly and falteringly the words leave her white lips. Slowly and distinctly they reach her listener’s ear.

He turns and gazes at her, as if he doubted her sanity.

“You saw Charteris that day!” he exclaims. “And you have said nothing all this time! Oh, Yolande!”

“What would have been the use?” she cries, passionately. “If he be dead, as they say, it could have proved nothing. If he lives, why should I give myself the shame, the misery of proclaiming my own mistake to those who care nothing for the suffering I bear?”

“Yolande”—and Lance’s voice grows stern, while his face is colourless and cold as a marble mask—“what is it you mean? What has been between you and—and Charteris? Why have you concealed it all this time?”

“Because I was a coward?” answers the girl in a sad shaken voice. “Because I put my own feelings before his; because I dared not let all the world know my poor pitiful revenge on him! And now—oh, Heaven, he is dead and lost to me for ever!”

For a moment there is a strange sudden silence; and then,—

“You loved him!” cries a fierce hoarse voice. “All this time you cared for him! Dear Heaven, have mercy on me!” And Lance falls by her side, with his head on the folds of her soft white dress and his hands clenched in agony above his bright brown curls.

Yolande looks at him in his bitter suffering, and her heart goes out to him in pity. Does she not know, only too well, too painfully, what it is to bear torture like this?

"I have loved you all this time," he goes on, in a voice so strange that Yolande can scarcely recognise it—"loved you and thought of you only! And I never for one moment imagined that—that there was any one else!"

"Did I hide it so well?" she asks, with a despair that echoes his own.

He is silent; only a tremor shakes the strong young form, and the sound of a choking sob escapes his lips. Yolande bends over the prostrate figure; her tears fall like rain upon the short crisp curls.

"Lance," she says—"oh, Lance, don't grieve! I—I am not worth it. You don't know what a wicked girl I am!"

“If you were the vilest woman in the world, it could make no difference to me!” he answers, hoarsely. “I have loved you all my life. Can I change now?”

Yolande is silent, shaken to her very heart's core.

She looks at him with wide sorrowful

eyes, while the heavy tears run slowly down her cheeks. At last he lifts his face, all haggard and passion-marred, and sees her own distress.

“Don’t fret,” he says, bravely. “You will make yourself ill again, Yolande.”

The kind unselfish words stir the girl’s heart to passionate remorse.

“Oh, Lance, Lance,” she sobs, “you are so brave, so good! Why did you waste your heart on such a thankless, foolish girl as I am?”

“Love is not in any man’s control,” he answers, sadly. “I loved you because I could not help it; and you—you did the same to him!”

“Yes,” she says, simply. “And yet I sent him from me with bitter words—I refused his love!”

“Yolande!”

“You see,” she goes on, trying to speak steadily despite the piteous quiver of the poor pale lips—“you see, Lance, I was

angry because he had offended me once ; and I vowed to bring him to my feet and repay him to the uttermost farthing. I did it at last ; but at what a cost only Heaven and my own heart know ! Lance, we bear the same burden, you and I ! I don't know which is the heavier ; mine is, I think, for, when I remember how I sent him away that afternoon with such bitter, scornful words, I could not know that that act would bring me a life's remorse. Oh, Lance, to think that he is dead—dead, and lost for ever ! that never in all the years to come can I see his face or hear his voice, or know he has forgiven ! When I think of the future—of all the long blank years when, in summer or winter, by day or night, I shall never meet him, watch how I may—when, in vain remorse, in heart-broken agony, I shall hold out my arms, despairing, waiting, and only shadows can fill them—when I call and call and there comes no answer—oh, Lance, how can I bear it ? Why did not

Heaven let me die when death was so near ? ”

The poor young lover hears these passionate plaints, and his heart grows faint within him. He has lost her so utterly now—lost her as though indeed the death for which she craves had folded her in icy arms which no power on earth could ever unloose again !

When the wild sobs cease, when the quivering form lies back exhausted on the pillows, he breaks the bitter silence that has held them both so long.

“Yolande,” he says, slowly. “I shall always be your friend. I shall always, through good and evil, through joy and sorrow, be true to you as ever I have been. But of all dearer hope there can be no question now. That is all—finished. If your heart is given to another, even though he be dead, there is no place in it for me. I cannot say I will try to forget you—that is impossible—but at least I will never

pain you by any recurrence to—this. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, Lance," she answers, softly, "I do. You are so good and true, I would believe you always—before any one. And will you forgive me all the pain I have caused you, Lance, to-day and other days?"

He looks at her with yearning eyes. A quiver of pain passes over the handsome boyish face.

"Would not you forgive—him?" he says, softly.

And Yolande sees how far nobler this love is than her own.

"One word more," he says at last, as he prepares to leave her side. "Yolande, I must tell what you mentioned; it is not fair to conceal it any longer. Of course your illness would be a good excuse for your not speaking sooner. What time did—he—leave you?"

"It must have been five, or a little after," answers Yolande, turning her white face away.

“And in what direction did he go?”

“He took the path that leads from the brook into the heart of the wood,” she answers, with painful effort at self-command.

“That is all you know then,” he interrogated—“nothing that gave you any clue to his intentions? I do not want to pain you, dear; but, if I don’t ask these questions, others will. This mystery must be solved, if possible.”

“I know you mean it for the best,” she says, mournfully, “but I can give you no clue to his after-intentions. We quarrelled and—parted. That is all.”

But looking at the change in every line of the lovely smiling face, at the havoc which pain and suffering have wrought in the fresh sweet beauty of this girl to whom all his loving passionate heart is given, Lance murmurs, with terrible foreboding,—

“All? Oh, Heaven, if it only was?”





CHAPTER XIII.

LANCE STAPLETON leaves the Court with a heavier heart than he has known for many a long day. All hope of winning Yolande's love is over now. Even though Denzil Charteris be no longer a living rival, he feels that his place can never be taken. It is not in the girl's nature to love again as she has loved the man she wronged. "And how that love has changed her!" thinks Lance, despairingly. "She looks as though earth would not hold her long. Oh, my poor little darling, if only I could suffer for you!"

Lance walks on rapidly to the village. He knows he has a distasteful duty to perform, and he longs to get it over. As he walks

through the narrow streets many a hat is touched, many a hearty greeting follows him, for the young man is a favourite everywhere. At the Mervyn Arms a group of men are standing, among them the police inspector, who, since the mystery of Denzil Charteris's disappearance, has been burrowing for information in every direction, likely and unlikely.

To him Lance addresses himself without loss of time.

"I have some news for you, Budd," he says. "Come into the inn parlour with me."

The inspector touches his hat, and with no expression of surprise follows the young man as he has directed.

Once in the clean little parlour, which is good Mrs Hobson's special pride, Lance throws himself into a chair by the window and bids his companion take another.

"Have you heard anything more since yesterday?" he asks.

"No, sir," answers the man, in the calm

oily voice peculiar to him. "Nothing of any consequence, so to speak."

Inspector Budd is a middle-aged man, with a serene, placid countenance, and an habitual smile so full of goodwill and peace to all mankind, that it is difficult to imagine his undertaking any office not beneficial to their interests and well-being. He looks as if not only the milk, but the cream of human kindness was overflowing in his cherubic visage and rippling over his full and ever-smiling lips. There are many people who have an unconquerable prejudice against this smooth and smiling individual, and declare that his hypocritical face is a covering to a mean and merciless nature, and a hard, unfeeling heart. But by the short-sighted and easy-going judges of character who never look below the surface—of whom Lance Stapleton is one—that placid visage is considered both good-natured and intelligent; they look upon Budd as a man useful in his sphere, far-seeing in his judgment, and

by no means unskilful in that branch of his profession to which the ignoble word "spy" is sometimes attached.

This individual listens with great attention to Lance Stapleton's account of what Yolande has told him—listens with a cruel glitter in the downcast green eyes that seldom look any one in the face, and with a suspicion awakening and prejudicing his mind which, if Lance had but known it, would have insured the oily spy a sound kicking from that impetuous young man.

"This is very important," he says at last—"very important indeed, sir! Why has the young lady suppressed these facts so long?"

"She has been ill, you know," answers Lance.

"Humph—ill! The illness was rather sudden, was it not?" asks the inspector, affably; and forthwith he draws out a greasy note-book, and proceeds to take down the young man's reply.

“Yes ; she was out in that dreadful thunder-storm on that day in June, and the fear and exposure upset her, and ended in a serious indisposition.”

“Exactly, exactly !” says the gentle Budd, more soothingly and silkily than ever. “Young ladies have delicate nerves ; and, even though perfectly healthy and strong one day, a sudden alarm—such as a thunder-storm, for instance—may render them quite incapable of giving information even in an important case for six—is it not six weeks ? Yes, six weeks. What a pity ! What a pity !”

“What do you mean ?” asks Lance, sharply, finding something in the words and tone of the man not altogether pleasant.

“Mean ? Nothing !” replies Inspector Budd, in a voice as innocent as a child’s. “Just a few more questions, sir, if you please,”—for Lance is preparing to leave. “Did any one see the young lady after her

return from her walk — when she was so nervous and excited, you know ? ”

“ How do you know she was nervous and excited ? ” asks Lance, suspiciously.

“ Oh, I merely conjecture, sir ! I naturally suppose that the storm, which had such serious consequences, must have left traces of agitation at the time.”

“ I met her in the wood,” commences Lance, and then he stops abruptly.

Before him rises the vision of the terrified girl fleeing wildly through the dark glades. He remembers her frightened face, her wild eyes, her clinging arms. He remembers her words too of the awful face she had seen, or fancied she had seen, and then her strange excitement, her entreaties to him to promise silence on the subject. All these things flash like lightning through his mind, and he turns very pale. The sharp green eyes note the sudden change in his face, the pallor of the healthy young cheeks, the hesitancy in his words. With pencil poised between fore-

finger and thumb, with the benignant smile on the thick lips more benignant still, Inspector Budd says gently,—

“Your answer, sir? I am waiting.”

“Then you may wait,” answers Lance, brusquely. “I have nothing more to tell.”

“Nothing more?” insinuates Mr Budd, sweetly. “You are quite sure, sir?”

“Yes,” says Lance, rising and shaking himself somewhat in the fashion of his own favourite retriever Lion.

“As you please, Mr Stapleton, as you please,” returns the inspector; “but I fear, if ever this matter comes before a court of inquiry, you will have to use your tongue a little more freely. No offence, sir, no offence!”—for Lance turns sharply on him with a look on his fearless young face that is not so expressive of Christian charity as Mr Budd could have desired.

“If you give vent to any more of your infernal insinuations, Budd,” says young Stapleton, hoarsely, “you’ll have a taste of

my fist before you're many hours older. I'm an easy-going enough fellow anyone knows; but, by Jove! there are things that even I can't stand, and your rascally suspicion is one of them! Now, remember that caution, or you may regret it!"

"Mr Stapleton—sir," expostulates Budd with remarkable forbearance, "in the cause of duty we are sometimes obliged to make ourselves unpleasant. I am very sorry that anything I have said should hurt your feelings—very sorry indeed, sir. I hope you won't bear malice, I'm sure. You see I hold a responsible place here, and it's my duty to find out all I can about this sad affair."

"Yes, yes," interposes Lance, hurriedly. "I know. I didn't mean to offend you, Budd. Of course you must do your duty. But your words pointed suspicion at some one whose honour is as dear to me as my own. I can't stand that Budd; so don't do it again."

"I see, sir, I see," says Budd, with his most affable smile. "That's the way the land lies.

Very well, sir; depend on me. I won't say another word that'll hurt your feelings on that point."

"Where are you going now?" asks Lance, sharply, as the inspector replaces his greasy pocket-book and takes up his hat.

"I am going to the wood," he answers, urbanely. "I must follow up the clue the young lady has given, and search in a new direction."

"Are you going alone?" inquires Lance, uneasily.

"Yes, sir—certainly. I have a special object in searching this matter out for myself. I mean to do it single-handed if possible, Mr Stapleton."

With a strange fascination Lance watches him. The smiling visage, the averted eyes, the coarse fat hands that are rubbed so silently and contentedly together, all give him a curious feeling of repulsion and dislike such as he has never before experienced. He sees the inspector leave the inn and go

down the sunny village street, a seraphic smile on his lips, a wonderful elation in his step.

Suddenly an impulse seizes Lance, an impulse which he will regret to his dying day, yet which now he blindly obeys. He snatches up his hat and rushes from the inn parlour, past the groups of idlers still standing about the door, past the good hostess chatting with neighbourly familiarity at the bar, past—no—not past, the sauntering figure that is walking so leisurely down the quiet street. He pauses, and halts by the inspector's side.

“Mr Budd,” he says, with a voice that he strives vainly to make cool and natural, “if you have no objection, I—I think I will come too.”

“De-lighted, I’m sure, Mr Stapleton!” responds the worthy Budd. “Shall esteem it an honour to have your society.”

Lance makes no answer, and for some moments they walk on in silence.

“Why are you going this way?” asks the young man abruptly, as they turn into the road leading past his father’s grounds, and he sees the old grey mansion gleaming through the trees.

“It is a shorter cut,” answers the inspector,

“I think it is much the longer way,” says Lance. “Beechhampton Woods lie there”—pointing to the right.

“True, sir; but it all depends on which part you’re going to.”

“Oh, have it your own way!” exclaims Lance, with growing impatience. “I suppose you know what you’re about!”

“I hope I do, sir,” says smiling Budd, with deep humility. “This road leads by the stables, doesn’t it, sir?” he asks presently.

“Yes,” says Lance, in an absent tone of voice—he is thinking out the perplexing doubts that will persist in troubling him now.

“I suppose you don’t keep that fine dog of yours anywhere about here?” insinuates Budd.

"Oh, yes; he's close to the stable-yard!" returns Lance, carelessly. "If I was to give a whistle, he'd be over the wall and here in no time."

"Dear me!" exclaims the inspector. "You don't say so, sir! What a wonderful animal! How I should like to see him do that!"

"Would you? Well, it's soon done," says unsuspecting Lance; and he gives a long shrill whistle as he speaks.

In another moment there is a rustle among the herbage, the sound of hurrying feet, and then a large black retriever appears in sight and greets his master with noisy gratification.

"There," says Lance—"didn't I tell you? Down, Lion—down, good dog?" he goes on, trying to calm the animal's exuberant overtures of delight.

"He would like a walk evidently," suggests the diplomatic Budd. "What a handsome fellow he is, to be sure!"

"Come to heel, Lion!" says Lance, sharply. "Follow!"

The inspector gives a quiet chuckle, and bestows some more invisible soap on his smooth fat hands.

“Now, if I had told him why I wanted that dog,” he says to himself, “I should never have had him following here at our heels, for all the world like a blessed lamb. Oh, how precious blind these outspoken, honest young chaps like Mr Stapleton are! You can lead ’em by the nose, and they never see it—only think all the time as how they’re a-leading you.”

Then they plunge into deeper shadow and leave the sunlight and the brightness behind them. Is it an omen of the dark mystery slowly and surely weaving its evil web around the future of both? In the quiet woods all is solitary and still. The shadows fall in cool patches over the sward, the soft moss looks green and fresh, the birds rustle the branches as they flit from bough to bough.

Shut in from sight and sound by its close belt of beech and tangled shoots of briar-wood

lies the dark pool, rendered difficult of access by the labyrinth of trees and underwood around it. No one has yet come to that lonely spot throughout these weeks of searching. It is unknown to most of the villagers, and in all the anxiety and wonder caused by Denzil Charteris's disappearance, no one has ever suggested looking for him here.

Even in the mid-day heat a strange coldness and gloom rest on this spot. The great trees ward off all the efforts that the sunshine makes to pierce their depths—only some stray glint, fiercer or bolder than its sister rays, manages at times to dart through the thick screen of branches in a triumphant flash, and mingle with the fluttering shadows of the leaves.

But over the black bosom of the pool no glance or ray of sunlight ever falls. It seems to lie apart, in its loathsomeness and corruption, from even the gloom of its surroundings ; it seems to hold some horror or some mystery in its depths which the very sunlight dreads,

and no ray is bold enough to dawn on those green and stagnant waters or irradiate their gloomy depths.

Suddenly, in the hushed and unearthly silence that reigns around the spot, there comes a sound as of pattering feet, a hoarse loud bay, and springing through the under-wood, and bringing a strange sense of life into the shadowy gloom, appears a large black retriever.

Voices break on the air now—astonishment in the one, disgust in the other.

“The devil is in that dog of yours, Mr Stapleton,” says the voice of Inspector Budd, not smooth and oily now, but hoarse and angry, and with a ring almost of fear in its tones. “Where is he taking us?”

“I’m sure I don’t know,” answers Lance Stapleton. “I have never seen this place in my life.”

“Nor I,” says the inspector, boldly; but, even as the words pass his lips, he looks through the space where Lance has parted

the branches, and a ghastly change comes over his rubicund visage—a change scarcely warranted even by the lonely gloom and chilling darkness of this most gloomy spot.

He draws back swiftly, his white lips shaking, his eyes full of an awful horror and loathing.

“*Here!*” he says—and his very voice has now in it a terror beyond all words.

His companion does not notice his agitation. He follows the dog into the open space and stands looking down into the dark waters of the pool.

“What an awful place!” he says, with an involuntary shudder. “It looks just fit for a murder!”

“Murder!—Ha, ha, ha!” And, with a sharp and jarring sound, the inspector’s laugh rings out in that haunted stillness. “A good joke, Mr Stapleton!—Ha, ha! Yes, a good joke!”

“Don’t be a fool, Budd!” cries young

Stapleton, angrily. "I don't see anything to laugh at, if you do."

"No, no! Yes—exactly!" stammers the inspector. "You see, sir, your words came in so appropriate that I—that you—"

"Have you gone off your head entirely?" asks the young man, looking at him with rising curiosity.

"I beg your pardon, sir," answers the man, recovering himself by a violent effort. "I—well, as you say, this is an awful place. It gives one the creeps to look at it."

"And yet you must have seen many such places, or even more awful, in your time, Budd," pursues Lance, as he leans negligently against one of the trees.

"Yes, sir; you're right. I've seen many a stranger place than this in my hunts after criminals and—"

"And crimes, Budd?" puts in Lance, as he hesitates.

"And crimes, sir, as you say," echoes the inspector, with a nervous glance at Lion, who

is rushing about in restless eagerness from side to side of the thorny underwood.

“Lion!” says his master. “Here!”

The dog turns back reluctantly and comes to his side as if entreating permission to renew his researches.

Lance regards him for a moment with great perplexity; then he says quietly,—

“Seek!”

The dog rushes off with a bark of delight, and plunges into the thicket on the opposite side of the pool.

“Follow him if you like,” says Lance to the inspector. “I’m too tired. I shall stay here and have a smoke.”

“Stay here?” questions the inspector, with an apprehensive glance.

“Certainly! Why not?” is the cool rejoinder.

“Oh, nothing, sir—nothing!” says Budd, cheerfully. “It’s a lonesome place; but, if you like—”

“I do like; and I mean to stay,” persists

Lance. "I don't suppose the place is haunted. At least, I'm not afraid of ghosts, even if it is."

"Ghosts! Ha, ha!" and the inspector's laugh rings out so wildly and mirthlessly that even Lance starts as he hears its weird echoes. "Well, good morning, Mr Stapleton. I'm going to see after Lion. I'll leave you to the ghosts, sir."

But Lance's face has no such pallid shadow on its grave thoughtfulness as the face of the man who has left him, and, with white lips and unsteady feet, is now making his way through the tangled briars and over the thick damp moss.

Lance lights his cigar, and seats himself on the gnarled and knotted roots of a great beech. His eyes look thoughtfully into the waters round which the dank weeds and ugly nightshade are so thickly set. Then his gaze turns to the belt of trees and the heavy screen of underwood that fence in this ill-omened spot. What is it that, suddenly catching his

eye, turns him suddenly so pale and stiff, that chains him to his seat with powerless limbs, over which he seems to have lost all control?

With a violent effort he staggers to his feet, and then suddenly drops back again.

"I won't look—I won't touch it!" he says, and straightway re-lights his cigar, and turns away his eyes in the opposite direction.

In vain—in vain!

It seems as if some hideous fascination draws them back—back slowly and surely—back to that same object. Such a little thing too—a piece of loose pale-coloured muslin, caught and held by the tangled branches—a fragment of some girl's dress may be—a little, foolish, fluttering thing, blown thither by some chance wind, caught and held perhaps by the rude rough briars as the penalty of some feminine intrusion into this desolate place!

Of course that is all.

"What more can it, shall it be?" thinks

Lance, passionately, as he springs to his feet and rushes towards the fatal bit of muslin, and takes it from its place with trembling fingers, and conceals it in the pocket of his coat. Yet, even as he thrusts the careless fragment in, a voice arrests him, and holds him there mute, abased, as though the simple action were criminal.

"Excuse me, Mr Stapleton," says the slow oily voice of the police spy; "nothing found here must be concealed. It will all be wanted in evidence."

"What do you mean?" asks Lance, hoarsely, as he confronts his smiling face.

"Mean sir? Only this. Your dog has found a hat with Mr Charteris's name inside it; and—pardon me, sir—I have grave suspicions—very grave—that we are not so far off from the scent as we were. I think if this pool were searched it would be as well, for 'tis my belief now that Mr Charteris has been—murdered."

As the horrible word that so well suits

the horrible place hisses from the man's pale lips and fall on Lance Stapleton's ear, a sudden tongue of sunlight leaps through the darkness and shines and quivers over the silent pool.

At the same moment the dog looks down into the loathsome depths, and then lifts up his voice in one long melancholy howl that fills the woods around with hideous echoes.





CHAPTER XIV.

LANCE STAPLETON stands with his hand in his pocket, into which he had thrust the torn scrap of muslin that the briars had held in their senseless grasp for six long weary weeks. The veins in his temples stand out like cords; intense loathing of the smiling smooth-faced watcher takes possession of him. He feels as if a net of suspicion were being slowly woven around the simplest action he performs or word he utters.

With half-closed merciless eyes the inspector remains quietly beside him, reading all the doubt and anger of the frank young face. He knows so well for whom that rash action was just now performed, and,

rejoicing in its non-accomplishment, builds up upon its basis a fabric the terrible strength of which only time can prove or falsify.

"You will be kind enough to tell me what you have found, sir?" he says.

The slow soft words fire the young man's brain with impotent rage. He swings round fiercely and flashes an indignant glance at the speaker.

"Found?" he repeats, scornfully. "A scrap of stuff like this! That's all I've found! Make what you can of it!" And he flings it upon the ground. But, even as he does so, a memory sharp as a winged arrow darts through his mind, the memory of a day when, while soothing a girl's fright and striving to pacify her fears, he had noted the fresh-made rent in her pretty muslin dress, and she had told him it had been torn in the woods.

With hasty fingers Inspector Budd picks up the fluttering fragment, and examines it

with a close attention that is absolutely maddening to Lance.

“What mountain is there coming out of that mole-hill?” he asks, contemptuously.

“Time will show, sir—time will show,” answers the man, with that mild reiteration of words that always irritates impatient Lance. “Now, sir, will you please look at this?”

He hands him the hat that all this time he has been holding in his hands. It is a broad felt hat of foreign manufacture, one that Denzil Charteris has particularly affected—a hat the like of which no one else in the neighbourhood round has ever been seen to wear. But, even if this had not been conclusive as to the ownership, it bears on the white silk lining the initials “D. C.”

Lance looks at it in a sort of stupor for several moments.

“This does not prove anything,” he says, in a low unsteady voice. “He—might have lost it.”

A faint smile wavers in sickly mirth over the face of his companion.

“Lost it?” he repeats. “Hardly possible, sir. Gentlemen don’t go about bare-headed as a rule; and even—”

The words are cut short by another prolonged howl from the dog, who still moves restlessly to and fro beside the pool—a howl which makes them both start, it is so weird and ominous.

“Lion!” calls Lance; but for once the dog refuses to obey the summons. He only utters a low whine and peers down into the stagnant waters.

“Will you send him in, sir?” asks the man; and Lance does not notice how anxious is the voice, how pale are the shaking lips of his questioner.

“In there? Faugh!” And he turns with a shudder of disgust away from the noisome place. “No,” he says, curtly; “if you wish the place searched, send for drags and have it done. I don’t choose to have my dog poisoned for your suspicions.”

“Very good, sir,” answers Budd with alacrity; we will return and let them know in the village what we’ve found. Nothing can happen here while we’re away, I suppose?”

A curious fancy crosses Lance Stapleton’s mind as he hears these words—a fancy that the man’s voice sounded almost as though he hoped something would happen in the meantime; but he says nothing—only in his own mind he thinks,—

“After all, Budd is a coward; in the presence of real responsibility he loses all self-control.”

It is quite two hours before they both return; and with them come men with cords and lanterns and drags, their faces eager with excitement—an excitement that changes to a dread and silent gravity as they come into the still and mournful place.

To Lance’s great annoyance Arthur Mervyn has insisted upon accompanying the

men in their ghastly journey. He had been loitering in the village, and, hearing of what had occurred, declared his intention of seeing the mysterious spot where these new discoveries had been made. In vain Lance had entreated and besought him to remain behind. He was determined to "see the thing out," as he termed it; and now first and foremost of the pale and awestruck faces around appears the usually jovial visage of the wild school-boy.

It is a weird scene. The gloom is so deep that the lanterns are lit, although it is bright afternoon beyond the thick dense woods. The uncertain wavering lights fall with strange gleams over the faces of the men, and the hoarse hushed whispers that from time to time accompany their labours mingle mournfully with the loud bays or plaintive howls of the restless dog.

Lance Stapleton stands a little aloof from the group of searchers, his eyes with sickening horror watching their exertions, his

strong young hands trembling like a woman's as he holds them tightly clasped behind his back.

Again and again the drag stirs the noisome waters; again and again the word flies from lip to lip—"Nothing!" The dread begins to leave the young man's mind, the deadly faintness no longer numbs his heart and creeps with death-like chill through his glad young veins.

"A false alarm! Oh, thank Heaven, thank Heaven!" he says, and leans back against the great beech by which he has stood so long, closing his eyes in the momentary faintness of this glad reaction.

As he opens them again a hoarse murmur breaks upon his ear. The crowd sway and move in one direction. Then a strange whisper steals through the stranger silence of the horror that holds them now. In an agony of fear—a fear that must know the worst at any cost—he rushes forward.

The men strain and pull at the laden drag.

How strangely, fearfully heavy, it has become!

Slowly, slowly—each second of time seeming hours long to those who watch and wait for the revelation so near at hand now—the dreadful burden comes in sight.

Lance gives one look of shuddering horror, and then falls face downwards upon the turf, hearing nothing, seeing nothing—faint and chilled to the bone, with a mist before his eyes that shuts out everything except that fleshless mass of corruption, which only a few weeks before had been a loving, breathing, living man.

Presently a hand touches him, a trembling voice falls upon his ear.

“Lance,” says Arthur Mervyn, “Lance, old fellow, are you better? It was horrible, I know. I never had such a turn in my life as the sight gave me. Let us go home now. We can do no good.”

Lance looks up and staggers to his feet.

“What do they—think—it is?” he asks, faintly. “Accident or—” But his lips cannot frame that other word. It is too full of horror now.

“No one says yet,” answers Arthur, taking his arm and hurrying him away from the ghastly spot. “I suppose the inquest will have to decide that.”

“The inquest!” cries Lance, in a voice of horror.

“Of course there will have to be an inquiry,” continues Arthur, as if proud of the superior knowledge he is displaying. “But how they’re to prove anything goodness knows; for the man’s past all recognition! Even his clothes are rotted away.”

Lance shudders. They are leaving the glade now; a path has been formed through the tangled underwood by the tramp of the numerous feet, the passage of many bodies. Involuntarily the young man glances back as he leaves the horrible spot. In that glance he sees the pale triumphant face of

the inspector looking back at his own ; and something in the malice and cunning of that smooth and smiling visage sends a thrill of fear to the stout young heart. As plain as speech could have told it, he reads the man's intention, the plan of his future conduct ; and he curses his own blindness and folly in having been the first to pave the way for such suspicions, so deep a dread has he of their future results.

" Oh, my darling, my darling," he murmurs, passionately, " am I, who would lay my life down to give you a moment's happiness—am I the unfortunate wretch who has led that vile spy's viler thoughts to you ? But no—they shall not touch you ! If human power can avert the storm, the approach of which I can plainly read, that power shall never rest till you are safe—I swear it !"

" What are you muttering there, Lance ?" asks Arthur, in wonder.

" Was I muttering ?" he says, with sudden effort. " Well, perhaps so ; Arthur, do you

know no one has so much cause to rejoice over Denzil Charteris's death as I?"

"What do you mean?" asks the boy, in perplexity, surveying his companion as though he entertained grave doubts of his sanity.

"You see," goes on Lance, in a strange, measured voice, "I have always cared for your sister Yolande ever since I can remember. Now of late Charteris has been my rival. We—we had a fearful quarrel about her lately. Now you see what I mean, Arthur, don't you?" he continues, in a forced, feverish voice. "Now—well, the coast is clear for me!—Ha, ha! A live dog, you know, Arthur, is better than a dead lion!"

"Lance," says the boy, slowly and sternly, as he pauses and surveys the white, strange face before him, "always up to this time I have looked upon you as a right good fellow and a true gentleman; but, by Jove! if any other man said such words to me as you have said just now, I should tell him to his face he was a cad!"

The indignation in tone and features of the boy who speaks so honestly and bravely seems only to give Lance Stapleton a sense of relief, not of shame.

“I don’t care,” he says, doggedly ; “I have spoken out what I feel. You are at liberty to make what use you like of it.”

“Good Heaven ! Lance, are you mad ?” cries the boy, furiously. “Do you want people to believe you have had a hand in this black day’s work ? You must be mighty careless of your reputation all of a sudden !”

Lance says nothing—he only passes on through the narrow path, while the sunlight slants through the parted boughs and lights up his pale young face, stern and set now in the martyrdom of a nobler sacrifice than the seemingly careless words represented.

In mute perplexity Arthur follows. He still thinks that the horror of the past hours has affected Lance Stapleton’s brain. How otherwise can he account for such wild words as those he has just heard ?

"I suppose I must tell them about this at home, Lance," he says, hesitatingly; for silence is by no means Arthur's strong point, and he prefers hearing his own voice to walking along by his now speechless companion.

Lance starts, and by a vigorous effort forces himself to pay attention.

"On no account! I mean, mention it only to your father. For Heaven's sake, don't tell Yolande; it will kill her!"

"What, in Heaven's name, makes you think Yolande cared for Charteris?" asks Arthur, impatiently. "If you're spoons on her, do you suppose every other fellow must be the same?"

"I know he cared for her," answers Lance, steadily; "and I fear she is mourning for him too."

"But she must learn this sooner or later," persists Arthur; "so, if one person doesn't tell her, another will."

"Yes, I suppose so;" and poor faithful Lance shudders and turns pale as he speaks.

“Well, if some one must tell her, I will. Keep silence till to-night, Arthur, and I will come round and break it to her as carefully as I can. If she was only not so ill!” he adds, mournfully.

“Do you think fretting after Charteris has been the cause of all this illness?” asks Arthur, curiously. “By Jove! none of us ever thought a jolly, flirting girl like Yolande would care two pins about any man, least of all a gloomy, stuck-up fellow like he was! I gave her credit for better taste; I did indeed.”

Every foolish word goes like a dagger to Lance Stapleton’s heart. How little this rash boy knows of the agony his silent companion is suffering!

All further attempts at conversation fail now, and Arthur comes to the conclusion that there is certainly a screw loose about Lance, or that his quarrel with Denzil Charteris has been more serious than any one suspects.

At the cross-roads they part, Arthur to go homewards in all the importance of possessing such a terrible secret, Lance to bury himself in solitude and loneliness, there to think out some way of evading the complications which fate is slowly and surely weaving around his darling's path.





CHAPTER XV.



THE long hot day has come to a close at last.

At Mervyn Court the windows are all open. The roses are drenched with dew, and their sweet scents come up on the wings of every little breeze that faintly breathes its languid sighs to the approaching night. A great peace, a great stillness is everywhere, falling as the light of the stars falls on the leafage, the gleam of dew on the flowers. Within, a faint glow of lamplight shows the occupants of the room scattered about in groups, or sitting alone, as they prefer. Mr Mervyn is reading the newspaper ; the faithful Skipton hovers in close proximity to him. Arthur is bending over a solitaire

board, an uneasy expression on his handsome boyish face. Vi and Enid are reading the same book—a fashion they much affect. On the couch by the window Yolande is lying, her white filmy dress floating around her, the beautiful masses of her hair gleaming like dusky gold in the faint lamplight, her eyes looking out on the dark, still, fragrant night with a wistful shadow in their violet depths.

Presently Arthur saunters up to the couch and stands beside her, looking out as she herself is looking—wistfully, waitingly.

“It is a lovely night,” he says, presently. “Don’t you think, Yolande, you might take a turn in the garden?”

His sister looks at him in surprise. Such an offer is indeed a novelty on Arthur’s part.

“Yes, I think I should like it,” she answers, rising languidly from her couch, “if you won’t mind giving me your arm.”

“All right,” says Arthur, chuckling quietly over his own diplomacy. “Here, put this on,” he adds, catching up a lace shawl and

wrapping it round the slender figure. "Now let's be off."

"Yolande, my dear Yolande," exclaims the voice of Miss Skipton, "you surely are not going to venture out in the night air—in your delicate state too?"

"Yes, she is," answers Arthur, abruptly. "It won't do her any harm either. Fresh air is a thousand times better for her than molly-coddling and medicines!"

"It won't hurt me, Miss Skipton," says Yolande, gently. "The night is so warm; and I will put something over my head."

"But your feet, my dear!" persists the anxious duenna. "Such thin shoes as those are not fit for—"

But further remonstrance is drowned by a fierce "Bother!" from Arthur, and the summary ejection of his sister through the open window by a movement more forcible than polite; "We won't go on the grass," he says; "just keep on the path. We'll stroll down to the lodge gates."

Yolande acquiesces, and, leaning on his strong young arm, she moves like a shadow under the starlit leafage of the avenue.

They are not half way down the long gravelled drive when the sound of an approaching footstep falls on their ears—a quick hasty footstep, as of some one speeding to meet them. Yolande halts involuntarily.

“Who can be coming?” she says.

“Perhaps it’s Lance,” suggests Arthur, innocently. “He often looks in about this time.”

“Lance!” repeats-Yolande, in faint wonder. “He has been here once already to-day. I scarcely think he would come again.”

As she speaks she hears the great clock in the tower strike slowly and distinctly. She finds herself counting each stroke as it booms heavily on the still sweet summer night—“One, two, three,” and so on, up to nine.

“Nine o’clock!” she says. “No; Lance never comes so late as that.”

But, as the words pass her lips, she sees it is Lance. He comes straight up the avenue

towards them, the starlight on his white haggard face, a look in his eyes that Yolande has never seen in them before through all the years they have been playmates and companions.

He stands before her; he gives her no greeting; he only looks at her pale sweet face with an infinite sorrow, a yearning tenderness in his own.

Somehow—Yolande never quite knows how—she finds herself standing alone with him under the elm shadows. Arthur has gone. For a moment she looks at Lance in silent wonder; then her voice breaks the stillness, all its music changed to pain and fear.

“You bring tidings?” she says. “I see it in your face.”

“Yes,” he answers simply, and draws a step nearer.

She waves him back.

“No; don’t touch me!” she cries, wildly. “I—I can bear it now. Tell me all!”

Lance looks at her, half in fear, half in surprise; yet, as he meets her eyes, he sees her

shrink, and all the horror that fills her heart speaks out in those speaking orbs, and over her face creeps the grey shadow of an indescribable change.

“He is found?” she whispers slowly; and Lance bows his head in faint assent.

“Where?” is the next question her white lips form, but strive in vain to utter.

“They found him in a lonely pool in a part of the woods unknown to any one,” Lance continues—“drowned. Oh, Yolande!”—for she sways towards him like a reed.

“Hush!” she says, holding up her hand and looking at him with the pallor of death on her own cheeks and brow. “Don’t pity me. I drove him to his death that day. Oh! Heaven be merciful; for I am indeed his murderess!”

“Yolande!” But the sharp cry in its agonised dread is silenced and cut short by another; for through the dark close trunks of the trees a figure glides, and a white face, with a cruel smile on the parted lips, comes between the girl and her lover.

“Excuse me, Mr Stapleton. Sorry to see you here, sir, under such circumstances. Again I must request you to bear in mind the words you have just heard. The case against Miss Mervyn was grave enough before ; but her own words just now make it doubly so.”

“You hound !” shouts Lance Stapleton, fiercely. “You infernal spy ! How dare you come dogging my steps and listening behind trees ! Get out of my sight, unless you wish—”

“Take care—take care, Mr Stapleton !” says the inspector, drawing back a few yards from the infuriated young man. “Don’t make matters worse, sir, by assaulting me in the exercise of duty. It’ll only make things all the blacker for you and the young lady that you stand up for—of course that being only natural, for all the countryside knows that you’re sweet on her ; but, if she’s innocent—”

He never finishes that sentence ; for, with a fiercer oath than ever his brave young lips

have uttered, Lance Stapleton thrusts his fists into the bully's face, and knocks him to the ground like a felled log.

"Lance—oh, Lance!"

That pitiful cry recalls him to his senses. The frightened face, the clinging arms, unnerve him as nothing else could have done. He draws the girl away, and hurries her homewards.

"This is no place for you, Yolande," he says. "Oh, my dear, my dear, what possessed you to say those wild rash words?"

"Because I felt them," she answers, solemnly. "If it had not been for me this would never have happened."

"Oh, hush—for Heaven's sake, hush!" he cries in agony. "Yolande, you little know what a horrible network of suspicion that wretch is weaving round your innocent head. Oh, my dear, be careful! Promise me this—that you will not say to any one what you have said to me. There are cases where even innocence takes the semblance of guilt."

“Guilt!” cries Yolande, amazed; and then she stops and confronts him. “Lance,” she says, “I remember now—that man’s words; at first I could not understand. Now I see. Oh, Lance, is it possible he suspects me—a weak girl—of *this*?”

“He does, the foul-mouthed idiot! The idea of placing a fool like that at the head of the county police! Can they wonder if everything’s muddled by his addled brains?” vituperates Lance in red-hot fury. “Come, Yolande, I must take you home, and then see to that—ox. I suppose he’ll lie bleeding there till some one picks him up. Now mind, dear, what I’m going to say. Keep up a brave heart, and don’t be alarmed, no matter what rumours and stories get afloat. All will come right in the end—it must. There’s the house. Now run in, there’s a dear! Don’t forget what I’ve said, and Heaven bless you!”

He wrings her hand hard as he speaks, and then suddenly a thought seems to come

to him. He turns and stops her trembling steps.

“Yolande,” he whispers, hoarsely, “if you have still the dress you wore—that day—destroy it!” And, ere she can recover from the amazement caused by his words, he hurries away and returns to the avenue where he has left his senseless foe.

He finds it vacant. Evidently Budd has recovered more speedily than his assailant deemed likely, for there is no trace of him now. Lance hurries on, and comes in contact with Arthur. They both stop.

“What’s the row now?” asks that hopeful youth. “You look as if you were pursued by Tam o’ Shanter’s witches, Lance!”

“Hush, Arthur! I’m in no mood for fooling,” says the young man, sternly. “Listen. Affairs are getting serious. That idiot of an inspector, Budd, has taken it into his addled head that because Yolande was last with Charteris she must know something about—about his death. In any case, I

fear she will be called as a witness at the inquest to-morrow. It's to be at my father's, luckily, as he's the nearest justice; and you may trust him to make matters as easy as possible for her."

"But, come, I say," interrupts Arthur, "it's a beastly shame to mix her up in the affair! And, if she was fond of Charteris, why, she'll faint, or make a scene, or something. Confound that meddling old Budd! I'll punch his head for him; see if I don't!"

"I fear I've already complicated matters by doing something of that kind myself," says Lance, ruefully. "You see he insulted your sister to her face, and my blood was up, and I forget all about his being a sacred being, as I suppose a guardian of the peace is. I therefore gave him a taste of my fists that I don't think he'll soon forget. I suppose he'll accuse me of assault to-morrow. But I don't care."

Arthur looks admiringly at his companion's

face. This is a way of settling difficulties with which he ardently sympathises; and Lance Stapleton goes up a good many degrees in his estimation for the deed he has just performed.

“Where are you off to now?” he asks.

“Oh, I’ve lots to do!” answers Lance, evasively. “You go home now, Arthur, like a good fellow, and break the news to your governor as gently as you can; and, for Heaven’s sake, don’t let them worry Yolande with questions! She’s got a hard time before her, poor girl; and she’ll want all the sympathy and encouragement she can get.”

“You’re a right good fellow, Lance, upon my honour!” says Arthur, looking sympathisingly at the face on the sunny brightness of which so grave a shadow has lately fallen. “It’s a thousand pities Yolande didn’t care for you instead of Charteris. But then girls have no sense. They don’t seem to know a good fellow when they see him.”

"My dear boy, it's of no use crying over spilt milk," answers Lance, with a poor attempt at philosophy. "You see it wasn't to be. Now I can't stand chattering here any longer. You must be off. You'll remember all I've told you, won't you?"

"Yes," says Arthur, with unusual quietness; and forthwith he takes his way up the avenue, wondering what in the world fellows could see in Yolande to go mad about, as these two had done. "She's a pretty enough girl; I won't deny that," muses the young philosopher; "but so are dozens of other girls. There's Judith Hargreaves now—a nice jolly girl, full of fun and life, and lots of her too; and yet she never seems to nail a sweetheart as Yolande does. Odd, I must say! However, I don't mind; she can wait for me, and I needn't have any jealous twinges like—well like Lance and Charteris and all those other young spooneys seem to suffer from."

When he reaches home he finds Yolande

has gone to bed, and the rest of the family are still in blissful ignorance of the day's events. It is with a tremendous sense of importance therefore that Arthur begins to inform them of matters, dwelling very lightly on Yolande's share in the tragedy, and merely hinting that, as she had chanced to meet Denzil Charteris in the woods on that day, she might be asked to give evidence at the inquest.

Amazement and horror are rife for the space of the next hour ; and Arthur is overwhelmed with questions.

Could it have been a suicide or an accident? Who did he think could have murdered Charteris? Was he robbed? What did they say at the Priory? That poor Mrs Ray—she would be broken-hearted!

Arthur parries these inquiries as best he can, and launches forth into vague descriptions of how he would trace the guilty person, supposing the powers of justice were in his experienced hands.

At last they have talked themselves out, and, with a parting injunction to the excited twins on no account to disturb Yolande any more that night, Arthur dismisses the subject and takes himself off to bed.

Night and darkness fall slowly down upon the grey old Court, bringing peace and sleep to all save one of its inmates.

For her there are no sleep and no peace. A strange fear creeps over her sad young heart—a fear that deepens with the deepening night and chills her with miserable forebodings. The words of the cruel spy still ring in her tortured ears; the memory of the horrible suspicion uncoiling itself like a snake from amidst the doubts and terrors of one evil mind recurs again and again. She thinks of the shame, the suffering, the horror that will fall on those she loves, among whom the name her own folly has tarnished has ever been an honoured and a sacred thing. Was she to be the first to bring discredit on its repute? And all for

what? A foolish vanity, a rash vow that now all the remorse and anguish of a life-time can never unsay. She throws herself upon her knees, the hot tears streaming down her cheeks, her bosom racked and tortured by bursting sobs.

“Heaven have pity on me, have pity on me!” she cries in her agony and despair. “This burden is greater than I can bear!”





CHAPTER XVI.



HE inquest is to be held at the Mervyn Arms, and a jury have been hastily summoned.

It is a notable fact, however, that both coroner and jury are all on the friendliest of terms with the affable Inspector Budd, and that he has been flitting from one to the other on the previous night, whispering his doubts, murmuring his sad regrets, and altogether leaving a track of strong prejudice behind him.

"Such a clever man, Budd!" the farmers and friendly tradesmen murmur over their glasses at the bar. "He's always got his eyes in the right place. Trust Budd to ferret out this mystery; he's the man."

But they look graver and more doubtful as the hours creep by, and a strange whisper circulates, no one quite knows how, among them.

“A lovers’ quarrel”—“The last person who saw anything of the unfortunate man”—“Fragments of dress found near the place where the body was discovered”—“Strange silence all this long while—sudden illness, when she’d been well and strong enough on the day of the disappearance—better to call it that just now.” So the rumours run from mouth to mouth, whispered with bated breath, and as the night advances they increase and grow wilder and stranger.

“Some one trying to screen her—another sweetheart in the case. Good Heaven! what wouldn’t those hot-headed young fellows be after?” “Who? The squire’s son? Oh, that’s another matter! Must be careful not to offend him.” “Taking the girl’s part of course—only natural he should—knows more than any one suspects.” “Well, it’s a sad

affair altogether. No one likes to bring disgrace on a good old family ; and, after all—”

“After all, friends,” says a rough, hardy voice, “suppose it’s only a mare’s nest as we’ve stumbled on ? Who can swear that the body we’ve found is the body of Mr Charteris ? Not his best friend, I’ll warrant !”

This bold and extraordinary assertion quite takes away the breath of Farmer Dawson’s audience. No shadow of doubt as to the identity of the discovered body with that of the missing man has entered any one’s mind since the discovery of the morning.

“Oh, but Budd says so !” chorus the disciples of that illustrious being.

“True eno’—and Budd’s sharp a fellow, and he knows what’s what.”

“Besides, if it’s not Mr Charteris, who could it be ?” asks another. “No one has been missed from here but him.”

“Ay, for certain, Budd knows. He bean’t inspector and head of all the other police for nothing,” interposes a fresh voice.

“Well, we’ll see to-morrow,” says Farmer Dawson, giving in to the decision of the majority. “Perhaps coroner ’ll be wiser nor us and identify the body ; though how he’s to do it is a moral mystery to me.”

“Bean’t there the hat found close to the pool ? And, if Mr Charteris warn’t drowned there, where is Mr Charteris now ? That’s what I says,” remarks a rubicund jolly-visaged farmer, a noted friend and ally of the worthy Budd.

“True—true,” acquiesces another. “Where be’s he now ? Gentlemen, don’t go off all in a moment with no notice to anybody unless something’s at the bottom of it. And if this ain’t Mr Charteris, why, where’s Mr Charteris that he don’t come and show himself ? He’s got no cause for to be hiding of himself all this time. The peelers ain’t after him, I suppose ?”

“Well, it’s a queer affair altogether ; that’s my opinion,” says Farmer Dawson. “Anyhow, I’m a-going home now. So good night,

friends, and don't be too ready to go a-burrowing with your noses in the warren that's set afore ye;" and, with this ambiguous caution, the sturdy farmer departs.

The next morning, however, when the jury are assembled and the business commences, it is remarked with some surprise that outspoken Farmer Dawson is not one of the number. Another juror has been called in his place. The incident is so slight that few notice it at the time amidst the graver duties that crowd upon their attention; but in after days it is remembered, and goes to the score of grave suspicions that point to a criminal of whose guilt none know now.

The process of identification is well-nigh impossible; for not a feature of the body is recognisable now. In that horrible pool the work of corruption has been rapid; and no clue, even in clothing or linen, is forthcoming. But then there is no doubt in the mind of any one there that this body is the body of the missing man, and the find-

ing of the hat near the pool, and the fact of Mr Charteris having been seen in the neighbourhood of the spot being clearly proved, the coroner declares himself satisfied that this is no other than the long-sought-for man.

Now come the depositions of witnesses. First and foremost appears Budd himself, whose pale face and swollen lips make his benign physiognomy less pleasing than usual. But his voice is as oily, his smile as sweet as ever.

He relates the fact of tracing the missing man to the almost-unknown spot by means of Lance Stapleton's retriever, he—the inspector—having furnished the animal with a glove belonging to the deceased; then came the finding of the hat, the persistence of the dog in keeping to the pool, the dragging of the water, and subsequent finding of the body. These facts Lance Stapleton is called upon to corroborate, which he does.

At the conclusion of his curtly-given evidence, he observes that he has a remark to make—

namely, that Doctor Deane, who is well-known in the village, and perfectly acquainted with the missing man, has expressed an opinion that the body found is of shorter stature than that of Mr Charteris.

Upon this Doctor Deane is summoned. He repeats the statement he has made to Lance, and with it another to the effect that the evidences of decomposition in the discovered corpse are surprisingly great for the lapse of time since Denzil Charteris has been missed.

"It looks as if it had been six months, instead of six weeks, in the water?" he says, in conclusion.

"Could you swear that this body has been in the water longer than six weeks?" asks the coroner.

The worthy doctor hesitates, fidgets, and then says doubtfully,—

"I could not swear to it; but I give it as my opinion. It is difficult to speak with absolute certainty in a case of this kind."

"Taking into consideration the state of the

water and the abundance of vegetable and animal substance contained in it, would you give it as your opinion that this body could not have been reduced to such an unrecognisable condition in the space of six weeks?" persists the coroner.

"I could not absolutely say it is impossible," answers Doctor Deane.

"Would you swear to that?" asks his interrogator, triumphantly; and again comes the hesitating reply,—

"I could not swear to it; but I think so."

"Well, gentlemen," says the coroner, blandly, "I really don't see that we have any grounds to go upon in refusing to believe that this is the body of Mr Charteris. Of course we should be glad of more absolute proof; but, in its absence— Who is that? Oh, you, Budd!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," says the polite inspector, "but a fact has escaped my memory that is very important indeed. You spoke of proof. I think I can offer very

conclusive proof. In drawing the unfortunate gentleman out of the water, I seized one of the hands to help. As I took hold of it something slipped from the fingers. I looked at it, and found it was a ring. I put it hastily into my waistcoat-pocket, intending, of course, to produce it at the inquest. Strange to say, it never occurred to me till this moment."

"Produce the ring," orders the coroner, eagerly.

"It is here, sir—in my pocket, just as I put it;" and Mr Budd hands it up as he speaks.

"The ring is in a filthy state; it must be cleaned," declares the coroner; and this is accordingly done.

With the stains and mildew washed off its broad surface, the ring is brought back and handed to the court. It rests in the coroner's hands a moment, and Budd's face grows paler and his white lips twitch more nervously as he awaits the forthcoming decision.

A momentary gleam of triumph flashes in the coroner's face ; he hands the ring to the jury.

"Gentlemen," he says, "you have heard Inspector Budd's evidence. Are any of you acquainted with the seal and motto on that ring?"

One or two declare they are ; the others maintain a discreet silence.

"Then it is my duty to inform you, Mr Budd, that this is indeed the most important evidence you could have supplied. This ring bears the seal and motto of the Charteris family."

For a moment dead silence reigns in the room ; then a unanimous murmur breaks forth, half of pity, half of relief. In any case it is pleasant to know there can no longer be any doubt as to whom they have found ; and the business of the inquiry proceeds.

Lance Stapleton draws a long quivering breath, and his hands grasp tightly the rail of the chair against which he leans. The worst ordeal of all is at hand now ; and he will need all his courage to undergo it.

The inspector whispers to the coroner. There is a moment's silence, a hush of expectation, and then the order echoes through the court,—

“Call Miss Mervyn.”

A thrill of surprise, amazement, fear, runs through the crowded room. Involuntarily all eyes turn to where, with slow and languid steps, still weak from recent illness, the slight veiled figure of a girl appears. As she throws back her veil, and faces the gazing throng, a strange feeling of pity fills their hearts. The girl looks so young, so fair ; and on her face is a shadow of grief so intense, of agony so great, as, in all the years they have known and admired its brilliant beauty they have never seen.

Yet the clear sweet voice answers all the questions unhesitatingly—questions so strange that a vague uneasiness steals upon the listening crowd, and makes them turn and look, with wondering eyes, at each other's faces, mutely asking what all this means, what new horror is to be revealed.

For, led and blinded by Budd's artful hints and cunningly-gathered evidence, a horrible suspicion is directed against Yolande.

Her father's face grows grey with fear and unspeakable wrath as he hears the base insinuations levelled at his fair young daughter's head. That anything so improbable, so unreasonable, could have entered the minds of mortal men—men in possession of reason and common-sense—he cannot imagine possible. Yet what is the meaning of all these questions—questions which the brave young voice answers so unfalteringly, let them point to what they will? What mean the pitying looks, the averted glances, the mysterious whispers, that he sees and hears on every side? Is he dreaming? Are these people real? Is it Yolande who speaks—Yolande, his pretty loving, laughing child, who has never before looked or spoken as looks and speaks this pale unshrinking martyr, facing this terrible ordeal for the sake of her dead lost love?

The old man trembles in every limb; his

eyes gaze beseechingly, blindly, at the strange and awestruck faces around. Amidst them all he sees but one—the face with his dead wife's beauty on the beautiful features, but with a look that never was worn by wife or child in all his fond remembrances—the face of a young, pale, resolute girl, with a halo of suffering about her golden head, and at her feet a sea of blood.

As that red stream flows before his sight his brain suddenly reels, and a cord seems to snap and break. He stretches out his arms to the darkness that engulphs him ; then light and sense and feeling are utterly gone.

Of all that happens and all that follows he never has sight or knowledge again.





CHAPTER XVII.

BUDD has forgotten one thing in the blind animosity that has led him on to persecute Yolande Mervyn, and that is the fact that many of the jurors are her father's tenants, born and bred on the Mervyn property, loving and honouring the Mervyn house with dogged and faithful attachment.

When the evidence has been all given, when the Charteris household have deposed as to Denzil's mysterious disappearance after his arrival from the Continent, and his announced declaration of staying at least a month at the Priory, the coroner sums up the case, and the jury retire to an adjoining room to consider their verdict.

"'Tis impossible it's a murder ! Far more like it's an accident," says the foreman, decisively.

"Yes, for sure ! Could a young weak thing like that go for to throw a man i' the water and drownd him ? There be no reason o' the face o' it."

"And she as kind and merry a young lady as ever stepped. Haven't we known her since she could toddle over the fields yonder, playin' and peepin', and full of the sauciest wiles as ever a little lass could be ? She ha'n't had no hand in this for certain."

"But what about the quarrel ?" asks a gloomy-faced man who holds strong religious views and preaches at a chapel in the village, and is universally supposed to be working in the good cause in season and out of season—more often the latter.

"The quarrel—ay ! Well, lots of young ladies quarrel with their sweethearts ; but that don't go to prove they'll be murderin' them the next minnit."

“In any case it's not for us to go making enemies of the gentry at the Court,” chimes in the owner of one of Mr Mervyn's farms. “If so be as anything's wrong, let the Charteris people take it up and prosecute. It'll go to the 'sizes at Colston then, and we needn't burn our fingers by thrusting them into the fire. Mr Budd seems mighty hard on the young lady; and I s'pose that's only natural, seein' as how he's got to ferret out all he can and make the most of it. Let him find out, I say! We've got no reason for to do it.”

“Shall we say ‘Accidental Death’ then?” asks the foreman. “I don't see what else we can do. There's no marks of violence. Leastways, they're not to be discovered, if there are. It'll save a deal of trouble, and get nobody into hot water.”

“How would it do to say, ‘Murder against some person or persons unknown?’ I should reconcile it better to my conscience to bring that verdict in,” suggests the gloomy-faced one.

“Or suicide? He’d quarrelled with his sweetheart, you know, and then p’raps just went and throw’d himself into the water,” adds another.

“‘Accidental Death’ be the safest; and we don’t give offence to the parties concerned. That’s what I think,” persists the foreman.

“Well, well, let it be as you will! Arter all, Mr Charteris a’n’t of much account to us. A gloomy, strange sort of gentleman, that’s wot I always thought; and never carin’ to stop at home and do his huntin’ and shootin’ like a Christian, but for ever rushin’ off to furrin parts, and comin’ back no one knew when or how.”

“And what could he ha’ gone to that lonesome place for?” chimes in another bright-witted bumpkin. “No Christian would ha’ thought of peerin’ and pryin’ about such a spot as that. It’s temptin’ Providence, sez I. You wouldn’t cotch me goin’ within half-a-mile o’ Dead Man’s Pool, I know!”

“Be’s that the name o’t?”

“’Tis the fittest name. And I’ve christened it so for my part,” answers the loquacious farmer.

“Well, well, time’s getting on,” interposes the foreman. “Have you decided on the verdict?”

“Ye-es,” they murmur, doubtfully, looking from one face to another.

“And I’ll say ‘Accidental Death’ then?”

“Ay, ’twere best,” echo the bewildered eleven, while the gloomy man shakes his head and murmurs of “wrath and the day of wrath,” and other agreeable and suitable subjects; and then they shuffle and elbow one another back to the other room; and, in answer to the coroner’s question, the foreman announces the verdict—“Accidental Death, though how come by there is no evidence to show.”

A sense of intense relief runs through the court. To so many there, it has seemed that something far graver, more dreadful, would

have been said. To the pale girl leaning so listlessly back in her chair the words come as though they have been expected. What other verdict was indeed possible? Then a hand touches her shoulder, and a voice, glad and eager, whispers in her ear,—

“Come away, dear, now. It is all over.”

As one in a dream walks, so she rises and walks through the crowd that part and shrink away—why they scarcely know.

Her hands are idly linked together, her pretty arched brows drawn close in a curious, puzzled way, and the soft eyes underneath look out in wistful appeal, in a sorrow mute and yet so deep.

As she passes along something—is it a whisper, a sigh?—she can hardly tell what—seems to sound in her ear, “It is not all over yet.” That is what she hears, or seems to hear; but it brings no such shadow of dread upon her face as falls over her life thenceforward. One swift glance back she gives—a glance that shows her, in one vivid

flash, the curious gaze and pitying looks bent upon her retreating figure.

But, foremost among all the faces there stands out the smiling, triumphant visage of the police inspector. What is it in the merciless eyes, the cruel smile, that sends a thrill of sudden fear through the girl's heart?

"Why does he hate me so?" she asks herself in wonder, as she moves away.

Ah, why? For in her frank young nature no remembrance lives of a childish jest uttered in the very presence of that smiling spy—an opinion the candour of which was free from all ulterior malice, but which the man's relentless heart has treasured ever since.

"Come, Yolande," says Lance, impatiently. "Don't look back, dear. It's all over now; we've nothing to do but forget it."

She looks at him as though his words were strange and unintelligible.

"Nothing to do but forget it!" she says. "Oh, Lance, if I only could—if I only could!"

"And so you will, Yolande, in time," he answers, soothingly. "You have been so brave. I can't tell you how I admired you—you were so quiet and calm. My dear, what is it?"

"I—I was looking for papa," she says, with faltering lips.

"You forget, dear, that he was taken ill in court. The—the heat and excitement were too much for him. He is at home now, Yolande, and resting. Come, dear, here is the carriage. Let us get away from all this crowd."

"And Arthur?" she says, still looking with waiting, wistful gaze into his anxious face.

"Arthur went home with your father. Come."

He helps her into the carriage as he speaks.

"This has been a sad time for you, Yolande," he says, pityingly, as the carriage rolls swiftly along in the hot bright sunshine.

"You must get away from here as soon as

possible. This shock, coming just after your long illness, must be doubly trying."

She sits quite silent, her eyes on the hot white road, her hands still clasped in that listless clasp which is so common a trick of hers now.

"Do you think papa is going to be ill again?" she asks, irrelevantly.

Lance starts.

"I hope not—I don't know," he says, with vague uneasiness. "You must remember, Yolande, that he has reached a great age, and—"

"Don't," she says piteously, as she turns her sad face to him once more—"please don't say that, Lance! It is all my doing again—my foolish, mad, unwomanly action! Oh, Lance, to recall one hour of that terrible day, to stand before him free and guiltless once more, I would consent to die!"

"Hush—oh, hush!" he entreats. "My darling, don't be so hard on yourself. It was not so much your fault after all."

“Yes,” she says, sorrowfully; “it was all mine—all mine. Don’t speak of it any more, Lance. Nothing you can say will make it seem less vile. I shall bear the brand of that day’s doings all my life.”

“Yolande, you must not look at it in that morbid way. It is absurd. Heavens!” he cries, impatiently, “how many girls quarrel with men or refuse men without a tragedy like this arising.”

The brave young face is very earnest; the bright eyes dart wrath and defiance all in one at a world of imaginary enemies. But Yolande’s eyes are hopeless as ever, her face is as sad.

For a few moments they are both silent. There are trees by the road-side now, and their grateful shadows shut out the blinding sunshine and weave strange patterns on the smooth white road.

The girl turns at last, and her eyes rest with wistful, solemn gaze on Lance’s earnest face.

“Do you think it is all over yet?” she asks.

“Of course,” he says, speaking out with a brave, steady voice that will not betray the fear lying deep within his loving heart.

“What more can there be?”

“I don’t know. I only thought—”

“Think of it no more, Yolande,” he entreats.

“Put it away as some bad dream, some horrible nightmare.”

“If I could—if I only could!” she wails.

“Lance, was it very long ago that you said I was too fond of laughing—I turned everything to jest? It seems years now since I really laughed.”

“It has been such a sad time—such an anxious, trying time,” Lance answers, with a voice that grows less steady with every word.

“But it will all pass, Yolande, and then—”

“Yes,” she murmurs, softly, while some faint shadow of the old sweet smile breaks over her pale lips; “and then I do not think I shall have to bear the burden very long.

Heaven is too kind. I shall be relieved in some way, I feel sure."

Lance does not answer—he cannot; a lump in his throat chokes his words. A convulsive sigh parts his lips. A hateful fear, sharp as a serpent's tooth, gnaws at his heartstrings. He knows what alone can release that heavy burden, what alone can calm that suffering soul; and his whole nature seems to rise and cry out in mute, intolerable anguish against the meaning of her sorrowful words.

"If I could only comfort you!" he whispers, passionately, as he takes the small white hands in his loving clasp and presses them against his throbbing heart.

"You cannot," she says, gently. "No one can; for no one can give me back the old time before—that day."





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE night closes in, and silence broods over the anxious, aching hearts at Mervyn Court.

Its master is doomed—not to death, as was at first feared, but to that life in death which is so inexpressibly awful in its pitiful imbecility and childish helplessness.

The shock to the old man's brain has been too severe for recovery. He is dead now to all the sorrows, sufferings, and anxieties which may follow—dead to the sorrow and remorse, the piteous prayers and beseechings of his best-loved child. He is calm, placid, helpless; and so he is doomed to remain—in mercy, so many think, though Yolande is not of the number. She has shed no tears—has given

way to no outward sign of anguish ; but there is something in her face which no one has seen there before through all the bright untroubled years of her girlhood—years which look so terribly far away now as she turns to them in wondering retrospect.

It is late when Lance Stapleton leaves the Court. As he hurries swiftly through the avenue, his eyes glance to the right and left, his brow is knit in gloomy, anxious thought. Before he is quite out of sight of the house he suddenly pauses and looks back ; then cautiously screens himself behind one of the tree-trunks near by, and keeps up the same vigilant scrutiny for the space of some moments. The bright moonlight floods all the sloping lawn and the flower-bordered terraces, leaving only one side of the grey old mansion in shadow. It is towards that shadow that Lance Stapleton's eyes are directed. Something moves to and fro, keeping stealthy watch on the house—something dim and indistinct, yet which the keen young eyes, sharpened by

love and distrust, make out to be the figure of a man. He breathes quickly. Involuntarily his hand grasps the bough against which he leans.

“It is as I feared,” he mutters. “That wretch is not satisfied yet. He means more mischief. No time is to be lost now. I must do as I resolved at first—see Herrick and ask his advice.”

He turns away abruptly, restraining, for prudence’ sake, a wild longing to return and kick the cunning, malicious spy out of his place of concealment.

“He cannot do any harm to-night, at all events,” the young man thinks; “and to-morrow—well, at least I shall know her case is in safe hands if the worst comes.”

Within half-an-hour he reaches his own house, and amazes the groom by a visit to the stable-yard, and a request for the immediate saddling of his favourite horse Devil-hoof. Then, without a word of explanation, he mounts and rides away, increasing his pace

to a furious gallop the moment he is out on the high road.

The moonlight lies calm and silvery on tree and leaf, on wood and field. Gradually the country grows wilder and more sombre. Great hills and bleak bare plains give place to deep rocky glens, all thickly clothed with ash and fir and elm ; and there, shut in by the thick screen of woods, stands a solitary house.

It is all dark now, save for one window, out of which gleams a single light. Lance sees it, and utters an exclamation of pleasure. Hastily dismounting, he throws the reins over an adjacent railing and rings the bell.

A sleepy-looking man-servant answers the summons, and looks with mingled astonishment and disgust at the late visitor.

"Master's gone to bed," he announces in answer to young Stapleton's questions.

"But give him my card, and pray tell him my business is of the utmost importance," urges Lance, slipping half a sovereign into the man's palm as a means of expediting his movements.

The man hurries off, well pleased at the unexpected *douceur*, and leaves Lance standing in the hall to await the success of his message.

Before long he returns and conducts him into a gloomy-looking study, announcing at the same time that Mr Herrick will be down immediately.

“Now, what is it, Mr Stapleton?” asks a harsh cynical voice as, a few moments after, Mr Herrick enters his study.

Lance starts, and comes forward eagerly.

“Mr Herrick, pray excuse me,” he says, “but this is a serious affair, and I want a friend on whose advice I can rely with confidence. I trust you will excuse my want of ceremony in coming at such an hour as this to see you; but once before—”

“Exactly,” chimes in the gruff voice, which certainly does not accord with the owner’s kind and quizzical-looking face. “Once before I was fool enough to establish a precedent, and now—”

“But really, Mr Herrick, this is—”

“Who is she?” asks the old man, abruptly, interrupting his explanation.

Lance stops, and colours all over his boyish bashful face.

“I—I never said,” he stammers.

“No,” interposes Mr Herrick, with a quiet chuckle, “you never said ; but you forget you are talking to an Old Bailey lawyer, my boy ; and he can see just a little bit through a stone wall still. Now sit down,” he adds, pushing the young man into an easy old-fashioned arm-chair and taking one opposite to it for himself, “and tell me all about it in as few words as possible. I can’t afford to sacrifice beauty-sleep even on the shrine of friendship, young fellow.”

“Well then,” says Lance, plunging without more ado into the midst of his subject, “it’s a case of suspected murder ; and the most blundering, addle-pated fool of a police inspector ever known, has thought fit to fasten his suspicions on the most unlikely person as the guilty party ?”

“ She’s a friend of yours naturally ? ”

“ How do you know it’s a ‘ she ’ ? ” asks Lance, colouring again, and with a curious disregard of grammar.

“ Do you deny it ? ”

“ Oh, no—you’re right enough ! The young lady is beautiful and highly connected—a daughter of Mervyn of Mervyn Court, in fact.’

“ And the murdered person ? ” interrogates Mr Herrick.

“ No other than Denzil Charteris of Beechhampton. He disappeared mysteriously, and has been fished out of a pool in the loneliest part of the woods. The coroner’s jury brought it in ‘ Accidental Death ’ ; but Budd—”

“ Oh, this is one of Budd’s cases, is it ? ” asks Mr Herrick, chuckling more than ever.

“ Yes. You know him, I suppose ? ”

“ I have had dealings with him,” says the old lawyer, in a voice of sly enjoyment, his eyes gleaming with the fire of old and well-remembered frays. “ What mare’s nest has he got hold of now ? ”

Lance repeats the case, and lays bare the evidence accumulated by Budd, and made the most of by that clever luminary of the law at the inquest.

“Humph!” says the old lawyer, at the conclusion of the statement. “So that’s how the land lies! And you want my help, do you? Why, isn’t the case over as far as the girl’s concerned?”

“No,” answers Lance, sadly; “that fool is still spying and prying about the place. He won’t let the matter rest, I know. What I fear is that he will apply for a warrant against her.”

“Pooh!” ejaculates Mr Herrick, contemptuously. “On what grounds! The case is preposterous. How could a young weak girl drown a strong man like Charteris? And, even if they did quarrel, as you say the provocation was hers, not his, a girl would not be likely to kill a lover unless from jealousy, hatred, or rivalry. There is only the evidence of the fragment of dress and the quarrel, I suppose?”

“Yes. Of course Budd made the most of the suppression of facts for so long, and Miss Mervyn’s strange and sudden illness directly after that meeting in the wood with Charteris. I could see that some of the jury were inclined to look very doubtfully on her. In any case,” he adds bitterly, “he has effectually damaged the girl’s reputation in Ashbourne. Every one will look coldly and hardly on her now.”

“Pooh, pooh! She will live that down,” answers Mr Herrick, cheerfully. “No one could credit such a preposterous story as this for long. I wonder,” he continues smilingly, “that Budd did not try to fix upon you as the guilty party. You and Charteris were rivals; consequently you had the strongest motive to get rid of him. Then, from all accounts, you were also in the wood at the same time as the young lady herself.”

“I wish to Heaven he had!” ejaculates Lance, earnestly. “I would sooner a thousand times have borne the weight of the

most horrible suspicions than have suffered a breath to pass on her."

"What a pity she won't marry you!" exclaims Mr Herrick, with gruff heartiness. "You are a good young fellow, Lance Stapleton, and deserve a better fate than you have met with at her hands!"

"Things must be as they must," sighs Lance, wearily. "I am not the sort of man she could ever care for; I know that. But, to return to our subject, Mr Herrick. What I want to know is this—if the worst comes to the worst, will you fight for her? There is no one I know to whom I could trust her case with safety but yourself, and, if—"

"But you know I have given up practising!" exclaims the old lawyer, with surprise.

"Yes; but in an extreme case like this?" urges Lance, beseechingly.

"Why don't you say, 'and for my sake, Mr Herrick, because I once saved your life'?" asks the old man, good-humouredly. "Ah, my boy, you are too generous to urge that

plea, even for the sake of the woman you love ! Well, well, don't trouble yourself. I'll think about it."

To "think about it," in the old lawyer's phraseology, is to do it ; so Lance gives a deep sigh of satisfaction, and wrings Mr Herrick's hand with a force that expresses his feelings better than words.

"It is curious that Budd should show such animosity in this matter," remarks Mr Herrick presently, after Lance has vainly tried to put his gratitude into appropriate phraseology. "I must watch him. He has either a spite against the girl which he wishes to gratify, or else—"

"Well ?" asks Lance, as he pauses.

"Or else he knows too much about the murder himself," is the curt rejoinder.

With an exclamation of astonishment Lance springs to his feet.

"You don't surely think—" he begins.

"I think—nothing—at present," says Mr Herrick. "If there is one thing more than

another I like to consider as my own exclusive property, it is an opinion."

"I see," answers Lance, smiling, despite his anxiety. "Then I am to hear no more?"

"To-morrow," continues the lawyer, "I will see the young lady myself. I will also look up the worthy Budd; he has recollections of me not very gratifying to his professional acumen;" and a grim smile hovers over the speaker's cynical old lips.

"Do you think he could procure a warrant on the grounds I have stated?" asks Lance, anxiously.

"There is circumstantial evidence enough for such a warrant to be granted, I fear; and country magistrates, as a rule, are thick-headed blunderers. Budd would have no difficulty in getting what he wants; but, if it ever came to a trial, no jury would hang the girl, if that's what you're afraid of."

"Oh, Heaven!" groans the young man, with sudden agony. "It is the shame, the scandal, the exposure that I dread. She is

so young, so innocent ; and already she has suffered so cruelly. It would kill her to go through such torture again ! ”

“ Then get her away,” urges Mr Herrick—
“ get her away till suspicion has died out, or—or I’ve caught the criminal. You look astonished. Humph ! My blood’s up. I feel I shall like this case. It’s a puzzler, and has a deeper meaning than has yet come to the surface. Leave all to me, my boy. Not a hair of the girl’s head shall be touched. As for Budd—”

A low expressive chuckle foretells the destiny in store for that luckless blunderer, as Mr Herrick rises and bids Lance good-night, declaring that he will not hear another word on the subject.

When the door has closed on the young man, shutting out the worn weary face with the new look of anxious fear on its youthful brightness, the lawyer returns once more to his study, and, seating himself at the table, proceeds to jot down with a rapid hand the

heads of the information gathered from Lance Stapleton. Despite his avowed predilection for "beauty-sleep," it is a full hour after his visitor has left him before the old man retires to his room ; and then his face bears a complacent satisfaction that shows he is well satisfied with his evening's work.

At an early hour next morning Lance Stapleton and Mr Herrick find themselves at Mervyn Court. All the village is astir as they pass through it, for to-day the body of the unfortunate owner of Beechhampton is to be buried ; and from far and near the county is flocking to swell the retinue of the mourning train. Lance is to be among them later on ; but for this half-hour he is free to serve and help Yolande, as his loving, loyal heart would serve and help her all his life long if she but spoke the word.

They are shown into the library, having sent up their cards to Miss Skipton in the first instance.

Lance stands looking out into the shrubbery,

and watching the slow monotonous drip of the rain as it falls from the heavy clouds. It is a dull, cheerless day, a day that almost blots out all memory of summer, so dreary and colourless are sky and earth.

The opening of the door makes him start. He turns round hurriedly, and sees Miss Skipton.

"Dear Miss Skipton," he says, advancing and taking the limp hand of that worthy lady, "I have taken the liberty of bringing a friend of mine here to see Yolande; but I thought I would ask you to tell her first, as she might wonder I should bring a stranger here at such a time."

"It is a trying time indeed!" exclaims Miss Skipton, tearfully. "Everything is upset. Management and method have become alike impossible. My pupils cannot give their minds to my instructions. Poor old Mr Mervyn is quite childish and helpless, and Miss Yolande—I have not seen anything of her since last night."

"Could you kindly send her a message

requesting her presence here?" interposes Mr Herrick, gruffly.

The handkerchief is abruptly withdrawn from Miss Skipton's eyes, and with no small amazement she surveys the speaker.

"Oh, certainly!" she gasps, feebly, retreating as she speaks to the bell, and keeping vigilant watch on the stranger, as though she feared he would offer violence in some shape or other.

The message is despatched to Yolande in her room, and the three remain awaiting her presence in the library, with various degrees of agitation.

Some five minutes elapse, and then the door opens, and three eager pairs of eyes turn swiftly and instantly towards it. There stands there only Enid—Enid, with face white as the paper she holds in her hand—Enid, with eyes from which the swift tears rain, as she flies in terror and anxiety to the side of her governess.

"Oh, read this!" she cries. "Whatever

can it mean? I cannot believe it—yet I found it in her room just now!”

Ere Miss Skipton can take the paper from her outstretched hand, Lance is by her side.

“Let me see!” he cries, hoarsely, and then, without apology or explanation, snatches the little note, and reads it with eyes where a great agony and an intense bewilderment struggle for supremacy at every fatal line.

“DARLING ENID,”—so runs the letter,—
“Don’t think too hardly of me for what I am going to do. I cannot stay here any longer. It will kill me to look upon my father’s face and know what I have given him to bear, to see the shadows of suspicion creeping daily closer and closer around me, and estranging all love and confidence from hearth and home. I have brought all this upon you. I alone should bear the punishment. I cannot write clearly and coherently, for I feel as if my brain were on fire to-night, as if the agony and shame of this day were burnt in living

letters on my memory and my heart ; but, oh, remember I love you, all of you, so dearly that I cannot bear to bring further suffering on your innocent heads. Some cruel vengeful fate pursues me still. It is that which drives me from home now ; it is that which nerves me for this last desperate resolve. Tell Lance—oh, but words can never tell him !—how deeply I feel all his goodness and kindness. He must not trouble about me now. I have formed a plan, and I shall follow it out. From time to time you shall hear of me, I promise you ; and, when I can bear it, I should like news of home—the home I never loved as I love it now, when I am leaving it perhaps for ever. You will know soon enough why I take this desperate resolve, know that I—your sister—am watched, suspected, hunted like a criminal. I cannot bear again what I bore to-day. You know that my heart is innocent, that my lips are truthful. Your love will never misjudge me, oh, dear ones, whom I leave so sorrowfully now !

A thousand words can say no more. Fare-
well ! YOLANDE."

For an instant Lance stands with the letter in his hand, all the colour and life gone from his young healthy face, his lips set sternly and fiercely in fixed and terrible despair; then he thrusts the paper into Miss Skipton's hands, and turns to the waiting lawyer.

"She is gone?" questions that imperturbable person, with a rapid glance at the changed and suffering face before him.

"Yes," is the brief response. "May Heaven's curse fall on the hound who has driven her forth in her defenceless youth to suffer and endure what lies before her!"

"Hush!" says the old man solemnly, as he rises and lays his hand on the lifted arm upraised in the mad longing for vengeance, which is the outcome of suffering and despair. "Call down no curse. The fate that follows crime is sure, even though slow. Trust to time and Heaven for the justice you would

blindly seek." Then with kindly words he soothes the weeping women, and shows them how, after all, Yolande has done the best and wisest thing she could have done. "If that blundering fool intends to follow up his suspicions," he says in conclusion, "he will have all his work cut out for him. Let it be our task to lead him off the scent, so that your sister may be unmolested till the right time comes."

Then they go away, the kind-hearted lawyer and the almost despairing lover, who sees in Yolande's rash act but fresh complications for her fresh suffering for himself.

How Lance gets through that terrible day he never knows. He sees the long dreary array of draped horses and dark dingy coaches and nodding plumes ; he is dimly conscious of the long drive, the mournful service while the rain falls in dreary heavy drops on the mourners' heads, and the moist clay descends in a dull dead mass over the lowered coffin. Then he is driven home, and sits through the lonely drive opposite his father, whose cheery words

and smiles seem to jar with fretful pertinacity on the young man's irritated nerves, and has to listen to reiterated expressions of wonder and regret with respect to all the sad events of the last few weeks.

"By the way, Lance," says the old squire at last, as his son rises impatiently from the scarce-tasted meal, "I forgot to tell you Budd was here to-night—for a strange purpose, it seemed to me. He asked me, as the nearest magistrate, to make out a warrant for the apprehension of Yolande Mervyn. I thought the man must have taken leave of his senses, and told him so."

"You did not give it?" interrogated Lance, eagerly and indignantly.

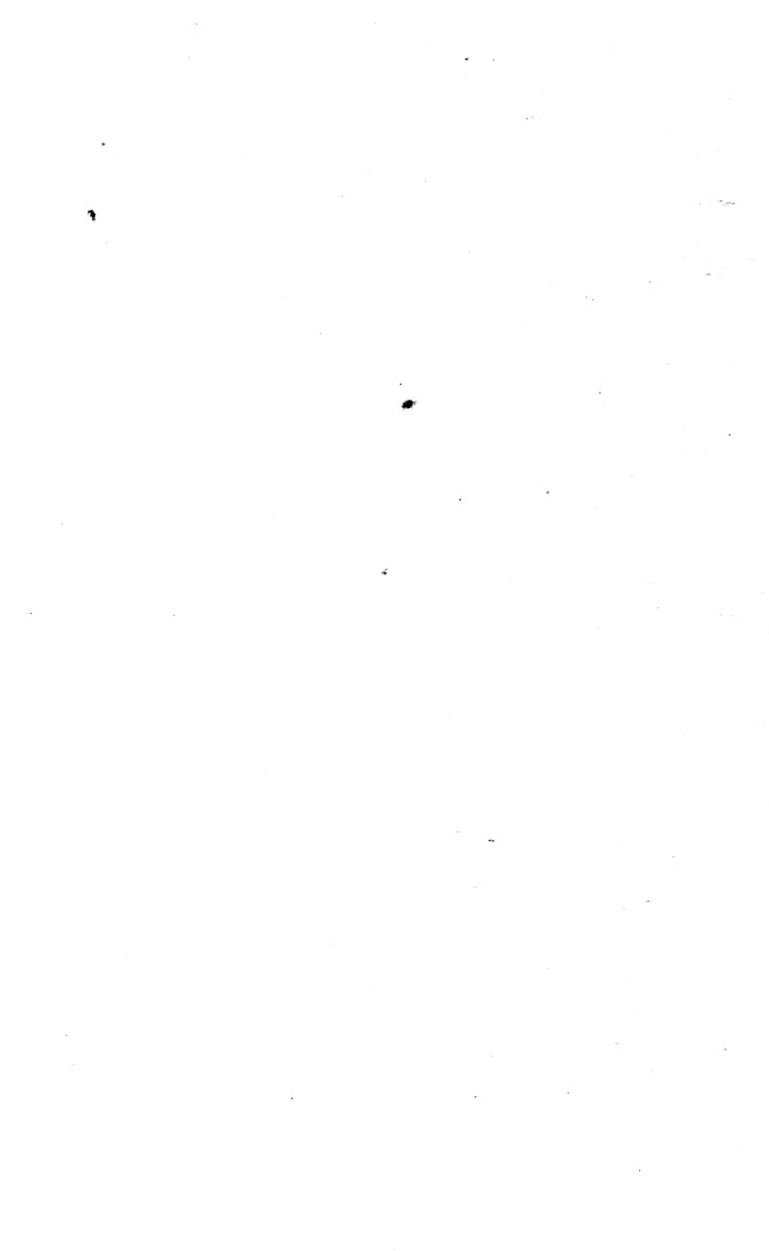
"Give it? Not I!" ejaculates the old squire, wrathfully. "I told him his evidence didn't justify my granting such a thing, and sent him off objecting and complaining in fine style. But, seriously, Lance," he adds—his tone growing graver as he notes how anxious and disturbed is his son's face, how weary looks the listless young figure—"seriously,

my boy, this is growing a more difficult and complicated business than we could have suspected. Budd is determined to get his warrant, and so I suppose he'll go to Colston; and in that case he will put it in execution to-morrow. Would it not be as well to warn Yolande? If we got her out of the way for a time— And yet—well, I suppose that would look suspicious. It's a sad affair, my boy, very sad, and she such a sweet girl and such a favourite with us all—a girl I've had in my mind's eye for a daughter-in-law, Lance, ever since you were children together. Ah, well, 'tis a strange world this!"

"Budd can save himself the trouble of getting his warrant," says Lance, calmly. "Yolande has left home, and no one knows where she has gone."

Then, with the old squire's wondering ejaculation of surprise in his ears still, he abruptly leaves the room.

END OF VOL. I.





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